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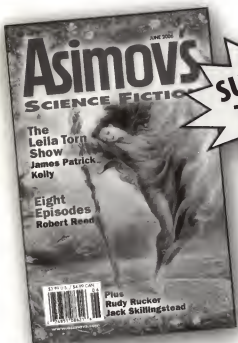
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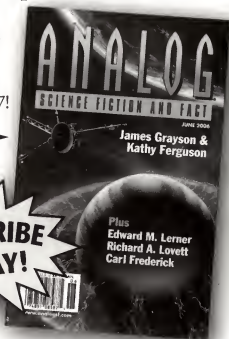
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THE PULP-ART TIME MACHINE

Not long ago my associate editor, the unflappable Brian Bieniowski, and I had the opportunity to take a step back in time. Another cool customer, *Analog's* associate editor, Trevor Quachri, accompanied us on this journey to the early decades of the twentieth century. Transportation was provided by the astounding private pulp-art collection of Robert Lesser. We had been in search of an appropriate image for this month's cover when Mr. Lesser invited us to a private viewing of his collection.

Before we heard from Mr. Lesser, our first foray to the past had been an expedition to the mid-sixties. We were looking for a piece of cover art that would suitably illustrate William Barton's evocative "Down to the Earth Below"—a novella that is both a coming-of-age story and a remarkable celebration of the pulp reprint paperbacks that dominated that decade. Alas, a few days spent traipsing the Internet soon made it clear that most of those illustrations were not available for our purposes. Of course, those paperbacks celebrated an earlier era of fiction, so we turned the wheels of our time machine back a little further, heading in the direction of the original sources.

At first, we did not make it all the way back to the heyday of golden-eyed heroes and ape men, because we found our cover when we disembarked in 1949. George Gross's art for "Huntress of Hell-Pack" appeared on the quarterly *Jungle*

Stories magazine in 1949. Although this magazine did not survive the great die-off of the pulps (it folded in 1954), it did outlast *Doc Savage Magazine*, which ran from 1933 until 1949, and this issue postdates the Tarzan novels that were published during Edgar Rice Burroughs's lifetime.

Our art director, Vicki Green, had come upon the Gross cover in the pages of Robert Lesser's coffee-table book *Pulp Art: Original Cover Paintings for the Great American Pulp Magazines*. This beautiful book includes examples of covers from all the pulp magazine genres: Westerns, science fiction, detectives, mysteries, horror, war, aviation, and other adventure magazines. It is just a sampling, though, of the works in Mr. Lesser's collection, and, while the book does bring that period to life, it cannot convey the thrill I felt as I stepped into a room filled with the actual paintings.

Witnessing those paintings nearly brought me to a sensory overload. I felt as though I had dived into a refreshing pool of water. As I splashed around in delight, I came face-to-face with George Rozen's portrayals of The Shadow and Frank R. Paul's Quartz and Golden Cities. I backed up into J. Allen St. John's painting of *Tarzan and the Leopard Men* (the art that graced the cover of the edition my father picked up at Johnson's Second-Hand Bookstore years before I was born), and nearly stumbled over

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the works of Hannes Bok. I was menaced by the paintings of Rafael de Soto and Norman Saunders, but Doc Savage, gloriously depicted by Walter Baumhofer, was there to rescue us. Mr. Lesser uses every inch available for his private display. Like the Sistine Chapel, even the ceiling is covered with art. Instead of Michelangelo, though, it was the work of Virgil Finlay that met my raised eyes.

Robert Lesser and other collectors have only been able to save a fraction of the art created for the pulp era. It is a gross understatement to say that the works were not appreciated in their own time. The collector believes this is because it was considered "offensive art." In addition to representing what was (and is often still though of as) "worthless pulp fiction," those paintings of bug-eyed monsters and rum-running gangsters were about "the threat of sexual violation and death in motion." The general public wouldn't hang the paintings in their homes and the intelligentsia didn't want to see them in museums and galleries. Even the artists were frequently ashamed of their own work. In conversation and in his book, Mr. Lesser relates the tragic loss of many of these paintings:

When the Popular Publications warehouse in the Bronx burned to the ground, hundreds of pulp paintings were destroyed. In 1961, when Condé Nast bought Street & Smith and moved to high-rent uptown and were cramped for space, they called the artists: 'Do you want your artwork returned?' The answer: 'No!' Street & Smith had saved their

art and it was a large collection of the very best. A small auction was held, but there were no bids, no bidders. Then the paintings were offered free to their employees; even at that price there were no takers. A tragedy in American art: the largest collection ever saved was put on the street for . . . a New York City garbage truck.

Mr. Lesser's recitation of these events sent a chill to our hearts. My normally phlegmatic co-workers and I returned to our office giddy with delight at having viewed these extraordinary paintings, but saddened by our history lesson. Brian insisted that if he'd been alive in the fifties or the sixties, he would have had the sensibility needed to save the lost artwork. Trevor and I, using a variant of Fermi's paradox, argued that since they weren't saved by anyone, he wouldn't have had the foresight to do so either. Still, I'd like to think that if I'd had the opportunity, I would have thrown myself in front of that truck. It's too bad we don't have a real time machine, but thankfully, we do have people like Robert Lesser.

In the early seventies, Mr. Lesser and others began to rescue some of these paintings from oblivion. Nowadays, this art sells to wealthy collectors for tens of thousands of dollars. Robert Lesser does not intend to get rich from his collection, though. He hopes to turn it over to an institution that will make the art available to all of us. When that happens, we'll let you know, since everyone should have the chance to visit the pulp-art time machine. ○

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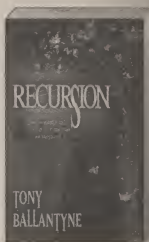


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MAKING BACKUPS

I was the youngest boy in my elementary school class, and when I became a professional science fiction writer in 1955 I was for a long time the youngest writer in the business. I am still the youngest writer ever to win a Hugo, for Most Promising New Writer in 1956. All that precocity has left its imprint on me. I continue to tend to think of myself as younger than I am, even though that Hugo, you will note, came to me exactly fifty years ago, and a glance in the mirror is enough to remind me that I am no longer in the first flush of youth. I am, in fact, a man of grandfatherly years, and as a writer I'm a kind of survivor from the Pleistocene, old enough to have been a contributor to the last few shaggy-edged pulp magazines.

There are, of course, still plenty of SF writers around who were already famous when I was just a kid, and who now, in their eighties, are still turning out books and stories. Just last year I was on a panel with three of them—Frederik Pohl, Phil Klass (William Tenn), and Harry Harrison—at the World Science Fiction Convention in Glasgow, and for that one shining hour, sitting among those sprightly codgers, I felt like a boy again.

But I'm *not* a boy. I've had one of the longest careers around, and I'm old enough to remember typewriters, and carbon paper, and manila envelopes, three of the primitive implements that were essential tools of the trade for writers when I was starting out. When, at a more

recent SF convention, I found myself explaining to someone what typewriters actually were like, I got a vivid jolting sense of how much the technology of professional writing has been transformed since my earliest days in the business.

The typewriter, for instance: I still keep mine sitting on a side desk in my office as a sort of museum piece. I bought it in 1968, because I needed a new one to replace the one I lost in a fire that wrecked my home that year, but it's essentially identical to the one I was using when I won that first Hugo in 1956. It's a German-made item, an Olympia: a big sturdy box-shaped object with a keyboard that looks something like a computer keyboard, a roller-plus-knobs thingy that allows you to insert a sheet of paper, and a chrome-plated lever on one side that you pull to advance the paper when you've reached the end of the line. A little bell goes "ping" to tell you that it's lever-pulling time. Since each line you typed contained about ten words, and we were usually paid by the word then, each "ping" announced that the writer would earn a dime at the bottom rate of a cent a word, twenty cents if his story was going to a two-cent-a-word market, thirty cents if it sold to *Astounding* or *Galaxy*, the two top-paying magazines.

Some writers of the Fifties used electric typewriters, but mine was the manual kind. The electrics,

though they required less muscle-power, made an annoying hum, two or three times as loud as the hum that computers make today, and I found that too distracting. I also was in the habit of resting my fingers on the keys while thinking, and some electricians had such jackrabbit calibration that it was all too easy to type a whole string of unwanted letters during a pause of that sort. Which was a problem, because you didn't just back up your cursor and get rid of such unwanted letters then: they were permanently there, marring the paper you were typing on.

Of course, it was hard work banging away on a manual typewriter, and my refusal to switch to an electric seemed a little quaint to some of my colleagues. But, what the hell, I was young then and had plenty of energy, and in a perverse way I *enjoyed* the physical demands of pounding on the keyboard. (The only writer I know who still uses a manual typewriter is Harlan Ellison. He isn't exactly young any more either, but he's mighty stubborn.)

One big problem we had, back then, was the riskiness of depending on typed copy. Today's computer-using writers can back up each day's work on diskettes, or ZIP drives, or any one of a number of other sophisticated data-storage devices, or they can simply e-mail it to a web site that will store it for them. The closest we could come to making backups back then was to use carbon paper, a messy substance that you slipped between two sheets of conventional typing paper: as you hit the typewriter keys, the impact on the carbon-paper sheet in the middle of the sandwich created a more or less legible

duplicate of what you were typing on the sheet below. This gave you an identical copy that you could store in some place other than where you were keeping your primary copy.

That system didn't work so well if you were the sort of writer who typed out a first draft, revised it by hand, and then retyped the whole shebang (or had it retyped professionally) for submission to a publisher. First-draft writing involves a lot of second thoughts as you work; you rephrase stuff, crossing out earlier rejected versions, and sometimes striking out whole paragraphs or even pages. I often wound up with only four or five lines of useful copy on a page. Doing that when you were using two sheets of paper at a time was wasteful and expensive, something to consider in the days when a five-thousand-word story might bring a writer fifty dollars, before taxes. It was also a nuisance when you were zooming along through a first draft in the white heat of creation to pause at the end of every page and assemble a new paper-plus-carbon-paper sandwich. And when you worked over your typed first draft by hand, the changes you made didn't automatically turn up on the carbon copy—you had to inscribe them there too, separately, if you wanted to keep an accurate backup version of your current draft. If you didn't, you risked the loss of all your revisions if something happened to your one and only copy of the manuscript, and I heard plenty of horror stories from my colleagues of just such losses.

Making a photocopy of each day's work would have been a neat solution. Ah, but photocopiers didn't come into general use until the

1960s, and when they did they were the size of SUVs and cost thousands of dollars. Large companies could own them, but not the average science fiction writer. (I bought my first photocopier somewhere around 1980, a huge, expensive thing that was maddening to use. It too is a museum-piece in my office today; I use it as the table on which my nifty pint-sized modern copier sits.)

When I was writing *Lord Valentine's Castle* in 1978, a long, complex novel on which I was essentially gambling the whole economic future of my career, one thing that caused me no little concern was the possibility that a fire or earthquake might destroy my precious copy of my ongoing draft somewhere during the many months of composition. (This was not quite as irrational as it may sound; only ten years before, remember, I had had that fire in my previous house that sent me out into the middle of the night with the half-finished manuscript of my latest book under my arm. And now that I had moved to California, I was living about a thousand yards from one of the most dangerous earthquake faults in the state.) So what I did was store my first-draft copy in a small disused refrigerator in my office, which I hoped might protect it against fire, and every time I finished a hundred pages or so I took them down to the office where my ex-wife was working and had her use the company machine to run off two or three photocopies, which I would store in various places on and off the premises. The process took an hour or so.

It sounds like a ghastly system. It was. But that was how we went about making backups as recently

as 1978. Eventually, of course, you finished the first draft. But most first drafts are too messy to show to a publisher, so the whole thing (650 pages in the case of *Lord Valentine's Castle*) had to be re-typed. I could have hired a typist to prepare a submission draft for me, but I liked to revise even while re-typing, so I did it all myself, at a pace of some twenty pages a day—more than a month to retype the whole thing.

Then, of course, the manuscript had to go to the agent or book publisher in New York. Today we e-mail them in: instantaneous, inexpensive. But e-mail, in 1978? Don't be silly. We used the U.S. Postal Service to get our copy to New York. You stuffed your paper manuscript into a manila envelope that you hoped was sturdy enough to hold together on its journey across the country, stuck the postage on it (and, if you were submitting a short story to a magazine, usually enclosed another manila envelope with an equal amount of postage on it so you could get your manuscript back in case the story was rejected) and, muttering a prayer or two, sent it off. Five, six, seven days later it reached its destination, if all went well.* (We didn't use FedEx. FedEx didn't exist yet either.)

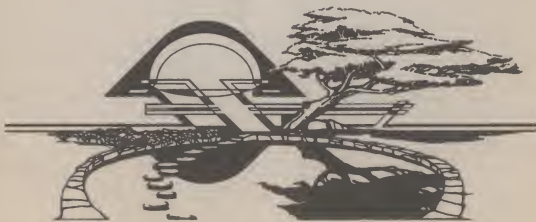
To modern writers it must seem appalling, and I suppose it was. But we had no alternatives in that ancient era. Ray Bradbury and Arthur C. Clarke and Robert A. Heinlein and Isaac Asimov all wrote and submitted their stories

*Don't throw out those envelopes if you're a short story writer. While Reflections and all other columns are emailed to us, all stories still come in the old-fashioned way—via the mail.—Ed.

and books that way—typewriter, carbon paper, manila envelope, post office—and so did I. Then came computers, and everything changed. By then, I had come to hate the typewriter with a terrible passion, having followed *Valentine* with an even longer novel that required close to three months of re-typing to produce a final draft, and in 1982 I bought myself a state-of-the-art computer with a gigantic 10-megabyte hard disk so that future final drafts could be generated just by telling the thing to print one for me. Nearly all the other writers of the typewriter era made the same changeover sooner or later, and those horrible old days seem like nothing more than a bad dream today.

I am, by now, behind the curve once again. After acquiring all the usual gadgets of the era I seem to have contracted gizmo fatigue in this very electronic new century, and I upgrade my computer only when I'm absolutely forced to by the obsolescence of the systems I use. (Isaac Asimov was like that too. He had a modest sort of computer to-

ward the end, but he never even owned a fax machine, and I doubt very much that he'd be an e-mail user if he were alive today.) So I limp along with Windows 98, I have not acquired any of the snazzy new computer accessories of the past five years, and I still use diskettes for my backups. None of that is a problem for me. I'm not all that active as a writer these days, and my current computer setup is good enough for my needs, however laughable it must seem to the likes of today's writers. If I were thirty-five instead of seventy-plus, no doubt I'd install a zorch port and a frammis storage unit just as they have. But I'm content with my equipment. Zorches and frammises will seem ludicrously obsolete ten years from now, so why, say I, bother to learn how to use them? And to anyone who remembers typewriters and carbon paper and sending in typewritten manuscripts by first class mail, the system I use seems downright miraculous as it stands. Yearning to improve on miracles seems to me like tempting the vengeance of the gods. ○



SECRETS OF THE WEBMASTERS (PART ONE)

social capital

In the eight (*eight!*) years that I have had the honor to be your web columnist, I have on many occasions experienced surprise and delight at sites I've discovered. But if I step back to look at the enterprise of bringing science fiction and fantasy to the web in the aggregate, what is particularly surprising is how often the best sites are the work of a lone webmaster. Why do they do it? It certainly isn't for the money—most websites *cost* their creators. And, while it may be for the fame, or as we say in skiffy, **egoboo** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egoboo>, renown among the digerati is slow to come and hard to quantify. So what's up?

One of the other hats I wear, when I'm not at my desk clicking links for Sheila and Brian, is that of Chairman of the **New Hampshire State Council on the Arts** <nh.gov/nharts>. It's an unpaid position; my fellow councilors and I advise and set policy for the paid staff of this tiny state agency. In my work for the Council, I come in contact with a lot of non-profit arts organizations: writers' groups, theater companies, museums, orchestras, and the like. These organizations depend on what some sociologists call **social capital** <cpn.org/tools/dictionary/capital.html> "Social capital refers to those stocks of so-

cial trust, norms and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems."

Perhaps the best-known exposition of the concept is **Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community** <bowlingalone.com> by Robert D. Putnam. In this book, Putnam documents the erosion of social capital: these days people volunteer less, socialize less, communicate less and, most alarmingly, seem to care less about building communities. We certainly see this worrisome trend at the Arts Council.

But it is the peculiar characteristic of science fiction in general and fandom in particular that we are awash in social capital. Some may criticize us for being too argumentative and insular, but nobody in their right mind would say that we don't care, that we don't communicate, that we don't socialize and that we don't volunteer. There is incontrovertible evidence of this on the last pages of this very issue: **The SF Convention Calendar** <asimovs.com> compiled by **Erwin S. Strauss** <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erwin_Strauss>, aka "Filthy Pierre," lists two-dozen volunteer-run conventions. Or check out the **Asimov's Forum** <asimovs.com/discus>, or the **Nightshades Book Discussion Area** <nightshadebooks.com/cgi-bin/discus/discus.cgi>, or **SFF.Net's newsgroups** <web

news.sff.net>. Just be sure to wear your flame retardant suit! And then consider the **Science Fiction Writers of America** <*sfiwa.org*>, which has almost two hundred volunteers serving on committees.

I would argue that science fiction and fantasy webmasters are also key contributors to the social capital of our genre, building and sustaining community online. But enough social theory! In the next two columns we're going to take a peek behind the scenes of some must-click websites. I wanted to use these columns to interview several of our most influential webmasters and ask them how and why they do it. So let's get started.

the webmaster speaks

Locus Online <*locusmag.com*> is the creation of Mark. R. Kelly, who is, by the way, no relation. Mark says of himself, "I discovered SF via *Star Trek* and *2001*, and then Asimov and Heinlein and Bradbury and Silverberg and the rest, and began buying *Locus* when it was mimeographed, from what was then a tiny one-room bookshop above a dry cleaner called A Change of Hobbit. I graduated UCLA with a B.A. in math, did graduate work in computer science at Cal State University Northridge, and got a job with a certain large aerospace corporation that I've held for twenty-four years now, working as a software engineer and process improvement specialist." He has lived in England, the Midwest, and the California High Desert, but has spent the past several decades in the Los Angeles suburbs. Asimov's readers will recall that Mark was the longtime short fiction reviewer

for the print version of *Locus*. In 2002, he picked up the first ever Hugo given for a website for his **Locus Online**.

Mark started the site in April 1997. How did that come about? "The departments at my day job were encouraged to set up website pages for the company 'intranet.' I volunteered to spend company time learning html to do so. At that time *Locus* had purchased the '*locusmag.com*' domain for e-mail purposes, but had no website. I volunteered to Charles Brown to set up a *Locus* webpage. In the first few months we settled on the selection of excerpts to post from each issue of the magazine, and I began experimenting with unique content for the website that would be in the spirit of the magazine while taking advantage of the web. Charles has been very generous in granting me wide reign in doing whatever I wanted to with the site, with very little interference or micromanaging, but with the understanding that the site shouldn't undercut the subscriber basis for the magazine. Thus, when a trial period of posting sample reviews from the magazine didn't work out, I started accepting independent reviews by others specially for the website, more often of films or graphic novels or slipstream books. Somewhat independently from all this, I had been compiling data on SF awards for years, and had talked with one major publisher about the idea of doing an awards book. When that didn't work out, and considering the problems of issuing such an instantly-out-of-date reference work in print, the *Locus* website provided a venue for that material, even though it meant 'giving it away for free.'"

Currently Mark spends roughly two hours a day on **Locus Online**. He has no help in maintaining the site. Mark doesn't use any website application software, preferring to edit html files in Wordpad and to use Paint Shop Pro to format and create graphics. He relies on Microsoft Access to compile information on books, magazines, awards, and author events. Over the years he has refined programming in those databases to semi-automatically generate webpages. Mark does get some content from *Locus* to promote upcoming issues and he regularly commissions special-to-the-website reviews and essays. Everything else on the site, the news bulletins, the new books and magazines pages, the posting of "blinks" and author events, he does himself. He uses Blogger to host his editorial blog, which is linked to the website.

According to the statistics kept by Mark's hosting service, **Locus Online** gets between eight to ten thousand visits a day, depending on the day of the week, with traffic usually peaking on Mondays. Mark says, "I assume that **Locus Online** readers include the readership of *Locus Magazine*—the dedicated readers and professional writers and editors in the science fiction field, the 'insiders'—and extends fairly far into the more casual readers and fans who don't read the magazine or wouldn't pay for a subscription. So I try to scale the website content to a more 'average' reader who's probably not as expert or well-versed in the field as a reader of the magazine."

When I asked Mark about the

economics of **Locus Online** he was remarkably forthcoming. He says that excluding his own time, he spent about four thousand dollars on the website in 2005. On the income side of the ledger: "The site has three sources of revenue. *Locus* Publications pays me a fee each month to maintain *Locus*' presence on the web, including the subscription form, the annual *Locus* poll form, and samples of current issues. I sell banner ad space, both directly to individual authors and publishers, and indirectly via an agency that provides randomly cycling banners for clients they solicit for my site. I link book titles to **Amazon.com** wherever possible, and purchases through those links pay me a few cents commission for each item. These three subtotals are roughly equal, monthly. Annually, the total revenue covers the expenses mentioned above, as well as what I spend on books and magazines and even a convention trip or two."

In the future Mark plans to expand the awards index and to knit it together with the **Locus Online** site and William Contento's *Locus Index*. According to Mark, "This would give more casual science fiction readers an entry point to discovering the field, understanding its scope and breadth, the writers to know and the classics to look for. I know what I want to do; doing it is just a matter of finding the time to do it. The great sacrifice I've made in doing the website, and developing these various expanded features, is that I don't read nearly as much as I used to. Many, an embarrassing number of, prominent books in the past decade I know by reputation without actually having read them."

So Mark, if you could make a living from **Locus Online**, would you quit your day job? He doesn't hesitate. "In a moment."

exit

I was struck by how much of what Mark Kelly does helps build the social capital of science fiction. For many, if not most of the professional writers I know, clicking **Locus Online** is a daily ritual. And when events happen that impact the entire field, like the controversial debut of the New York Times science fiction columnist or the untimely death of Octavia Butler or the latest award news, **Locus Online** is where our little community first gathers for links and letters. I use Mark's awards index—which

he gives away for free—regularly, not only in writing this column, but also to recommend stories, as he says, to give "more casual SF readers an entry point to discovering the field."

In Part Two of this column, I'll visit with some other talented webmasters and make more sweeping generalizations about the culture of science fiction. Meanwhile, let me exit on a geek note. You may have noticed a change in the way I point you toward the sites mentioned in this column. From now on, I'll be leaving off the *http://www* wherever possible. You can almost always type what comes after *http://www* and have Explorer and Firefox pick up the link.

And getting rid of that unnecessary alphabet soup leaves more room for links!

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LETTERS

Dear Brian Bieniowski:

I was surprised and disappointed that you did not mention, in your "A Possible Planet" article in the April/May issue, a favorite NPR program of mine; "Hearts of Space" <<http://hos.com>> hosted by Steven Hill. Most of the artists, etc., mentioned in your article are presented in this fine program.

Pete Blackwell
Hockley, TX

The author replies. . .

Mr. Blackwell is absolutely correct, Hearts of Space is a landmark radio show of the ambient and new age music genres and is worth seeking out on your radio dial. I would also recommend Chuck van Zyl's excellent Star's End broadcasts, which can be streamed directly via the internet from the Star's End website at <<http://www.starsend.org>>.

Dear Asimov's:

I was very much taken with the cover of your April/May double issue, and was rather disappointed to discover there was no story that went with it inside the magazine.

Could you please ask a writer, or perhaps several writers, to come up with stories inspired by this cover? I would certainly like to find out about the "Gernsback Expedition"!

Phyllis S. Schmutz
Nesconset, NY

Dear Sheila,

I am a happy subscriber to your magazine. I look forward to reading

them each month. My reason today has to do with the cover artwork, which is usually quite good. I am especially pleased with the Asimov's June 2006 cover by Kuniko Y. Craft!

I have a small suggestion for these magazines, however. As a fantasy and science fiction reader, I also had a subscription to *F&SF* and I noticed that they print, along with the normal artist credit for the cover art, the title of the story it is associated with (it is not always associated with the lead story).

Thank you for publishing a great set of magazines. I hope that you take my suggestion into consideration.

Phillip Norman
Norco, CA

Six times a year, we use stock illustrations, i.e., illustrations that already exist because they were created for another purpose, on our covers. Although we do our best to find cover art that corresponds to a story or a theme at play in a particular issue, we can't actually attribute a piece of stock art to the story that we hope it represents. Recently, though, we've gone back to a policy of attributing our four commissioned covers to the stories that inspired them.

—Sheila Williams

Mr. Silverberg,

I enjoyed your "History of the Papacy," and couldn't resist responding to it. As a non-Catholic, but close to them, I appreciated the humor in some of the forgettable incidents of the Church's past.

Many people agree that the late John Paul did a lot to eliminate the discord between Christians, and a prominent Protestant was heard to say, "What we need is a Pope—that Pope." As an Anglo-Catholic, I wish the Church had kept to its origins, and there would not have been a need for a Reformation. Wouldn't it be neat if the Chief Rabbi of Israel were an Episcopalian? Or, God help us, the Grand Mufti of Egypt a Jew? And as one who grew up surrounded by wonderful Jewish neighbors, I feel a kinship with Judaism, and hope that some day we can all put our arms around each other in God's presence.

Your story, "Hanosz Prime Goes to Old Earth" was one of the best I have ever read.

Robert A. Stanton
Seminole, FL

Greetings,

I am quite pleased to see an editorial in the July issue concerning my favorite obsession, and professional specialization: dinosaurs. However (and I hate to be the bearer of bad news), Mr. Silverberg is mistaken in thinking that having a *Mesosaurus* specimen on display puts a dinosaur in his living room.

Mesosaurus is not a member of Dinosauria. (Dinosauria is current-

ly defined in scientific circles as the most recent common ancestor of *Iguanodon* and *Megalosaurus* and all of that ancestor's descendants). The mesosaurids were a far more ancient lineage of reptiles, already a distinct group seventy million years before the first dinosaurs appeared. Mesosaurs are more distantly related to dinosaurs than are pterosaurs, crocodilians, lizards, snakes, and possibly turtles (the origin of the latter being one of the biggest enigmas in vertebrate evolution at present).

So *Mesosaurus* is no dinosaur. However, not to despair! Given the current definition of Dinosauria, Mr. Silverberg almost certainly DOES have dinosaurs around his house. The origin of birds lies within the small feathered coelurosaurian dinosaurs. Consequently, as descendants of the most recent common ancestor of *Iguanodon* and *Megalosaurus*, birds are dinosaurs. So, while he has none in his living room, Silverberg might very well have dinosaurs in his yard, and occasionally on the dining room table!

Thomas R. Holtz, Jr.
Senior Lecturer,
Vertebrate Paleontology
Department of Geology
University of Maryland
College Park, MD

We welcome your letters. They should be sent to **Asimov's**, 475 Park Avenue South, Floor 11, New York, NY 10016, or e-mailed to **asimovs@dellmagazines.com**. Space and time make it impossible to print or answer all letters, but please include your mailing address even if you use e-mail. If you don't want your address printed, put it only in the heading of your letter; if you do want it printed, please put your address under your signature. We reserve the right to shorten and copy-edit letters. The email address is for editorial correspondence *only*—please direct all subscription inquiries to: 6 Prowitt Street, Norwalk, CT 06855.

A BILLION EVES

Robert Reed

Robert Reed tells us the following tale "is a brutal reworking of a story that I first wrote in my mid-twenties. What remains from that earlier attempt is the flashback sections with the sorority house . . . except that I changed the point-of-view and the general tone, and, hopefully, I bring to bear the wisdom of a couple of decades of life experience."

1

Kala's parents were thrifty, impractical people. They deplored spending money, particularly on anything that smacked of luxury or indulgence; yet, at the same time, they suffered from big dreams and a crippling inability to set responsible goals.

One spring evening, Father announced, "We should take a long drive this summer."

"To where?" Mom asked warily.

"Into the mountains," he answered. "Just like we've talked about doing a thousand times."

"But can we afford it?"

"If we count our coins, and if the fund drive keeps doing well. Why not?" First Day celebrations had just finished, and their church, which prided itself on its responsible goals, was having a successful year. "A taste of the wilderness," he cried out at the dinner table. "Doesn't that sound fun?"

To any other family, that would have been the beginning of a wonderful holiday. But Kala knew better. Trouble arrived as soon as they began drawing up lists of destinations. Her brother Sandor demanded a day or

two spent exploring the canyon always named Grand. Father divulged an unsuspected fondness for the sleepy, ice-caked volcanoes near the Mother Ocean. When pressed, Kala admitted that she would love walking a beach beside the brackish Mormon Sea. And while Mom didn't particularly care about scenery—a point made with a distinctly superior tone—she mentioned having five sisters scattered across the West. They couldn't travel through that country and not stop at each of their front doors, if only to quickly pay their respects.

Suddenly their objectives filled a long piece of paper, and even an eleven-year-old girl could see what was obvious: Just the driving was going choke their vacation. Worse still, Mom announced, "There's no reason to pay strangers to cook for us. We'll bring our own food." That meant dragging a bulky cooler everywhere they went, and every meal would be sloppy sandwiches, and every day would begin with a hunt for fresh ice and cheap groceries to replace the supplies that would inevitably spoil.

Not wanting to be out-cheaped by his wife, Father added, "And we'll be camping, of course." But how could they camp? They didn't have equipment. "Oh, we have our sleeping sacks," he reminded his doubting daughter. "And I'll borrow gear from our friends at church. I'm sure I can. So don't worry. It's going to be wonderful! We'll just drive as far as we want every day and pull over at nightfall. Just so long as it costs nothing to pitch a tent."

To Kala, this seemed like an impossible, doomed journey. Too many miles had to be conquered, too many wishes granted, and even under the best circumstances, nobody would end up happy.

"Why don't you guys ever learn?" Kala muttered.

"What was that, darling?"

"Nothing, Father," she replied with a minimal bow. "Nothing."

Yet luck occasionally smiles, particularly on the most afflicted souls. They were still a couple of hundred miles from the mountains when the radiator hose burst. Suddenly the hot July air was filled with hissing steam and the sweet taste of antifreeze. Father invested a few moments cursing God and the First Father before he pulled onto the shoulder. "Stay inside," he ordered. Then he climbed out and lifted the long hood with a metallic screech, breathing deeply before vanishing into the swirling, superheated cloud.

Sandor wanted to help. He practically begged Mom for the chance. But she shot a warning stare back at him, saying, "No, young father. You're staying with me. It's dangerous out there!"

"It's not," Kala's brother maintained.

But an instant later, as if to prove Mom correct, Father cried out. He screamed twice. The poor man had burned his right hand with the scalding water. And as if to balance his misery, he then blindly reached out with his left hand, briefly touching the overheated engine block.

"Are you all right?" Mom called out.

Father dropped the hood and stared in through the windshield, pale as a tortoise egg and wincing in misery.

"Leave that hood open," Sandor shouted. "Just a crack!"

"Why?" the burnt man asked.

"To let the air blow through and cool the engine," the boy explained. He wasn't two years older than Kala, but unlike either parent, Sandor had a pragmatic genius for machinery and other necessities of life. Leaning toward his little sister, he said, "If we're lucky, all we'll need is a new hose and fluid."

But we aren't lucky people, she kept thinking.

They had left home on the Friday Sabbath, which meant that most of the world was closed for business. Yet despite Kala's misgivings, this proved to be an exceptional day: Father drove their wounded car back to the last intersection, and through some uncommon fluke, they found a little fix-it and fuel shop that was open. A burly old gentleman welcomed them with cornbread and promises of a quick repair. He gave Father a medicating salve and showed the women a new Lady's Room in back, out of sight of the highway. But there wasn't any reason to hide. Mom had her children late in life, and besides, she'd let herself get heavy over the last few years. And Kala was still wearing a little girl's body, her face soon to turn lovely, but camouflaged for the moment with youth and a clumsy abundance of sharp bone.

Sharing the public room, the mother and daughter finished their cornbread while their men stood in the garage, staring at the hot, wet engine.

Despite its being the Sabbath, the traffic was heavy—freight trucks and tiny cars and everything between. Traveling men and a few women bought fuel and sweet drinks. The women were always quick to pay and eager to leave; most were nearly as old as Mom, but where was the point in taking chances? The male customers lingered, and the fix-it man seemed to relish their company, discussing every possible subject with each of them. The weather was a vital topic, as were sports teams and the boring district news. A glum little truck driver argued that the world was already too crowded and cluttered for his tastes, and the old gentleman couldn't agree more. Yet the next customer was a happy salesman, and, in front of him, the fix-it man couldn't stop praising their wise government and the rapid expansion of the population.

Kala mentioned these inconsistencies to her mother.

She shrugged them off, explaining, "He's a businessman, darling. He dresses his words for the occasion."

Kala's bony face turned skeptical. She had always been the smartest student at her Lady's Academy. But she was also a serious, nearly humorless creature, and perhaps because of that, she always felt too sure of herself. In any situation, she believed there was one answer that was right, only one message worth giving, and the good person held her position against all enemies. "I'd never dress up my words," she vowed. "Not one way or the other."

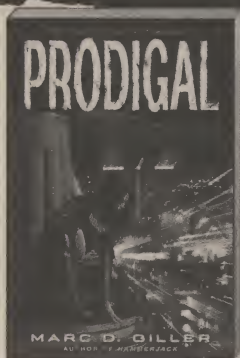
"Why am I not surprised?" Mom replied, finding some reason to laugh.

Kala decided to be politely silent, at least for the present time. She listened to hymns playing on the shop's radio, humming along with her favorites. She studied her favorite field guide to the native flora and fauna, preparing herself for the wilderness to come. The surrounding country-

The crackling conclusion to Marc Giller's two-part adventure

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—Neal Asher, author of *Gridlinked*

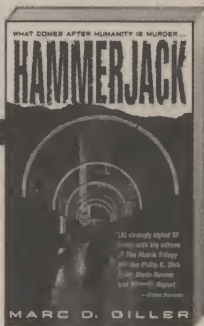


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side was as far removed from wilderness as possible—level and open, green corn stretching to every horizon and a few junipers planted beside the highway as windbreaks. Sometimes Kala would rise from her chair and wander around the little room. The shop's moneybox was locked and screwed into the top of a long plastic cabinet. Old forms and paid bills were stacked in a dusty corner. A metal door led back into the Lady's Room, opened for the moment but ready to be slammed shut and locked with a bright steel bolt. Next to that door was a big sheet of poster board covered with photographs of young women. Several dozen faces smiled toward the cameras. Returning to her chair, Kala commented on how many girls that was.

Her mother simply nodded, making no comment.

After her next trip around the room, Kala asked, "Were all of those girls taken?"

"Hardly," Mom replied instantly, as if she were waiting for the question. "Probably most are runaways. Bad homes and the wrong friends, and now they're living on the street somewhere. Only missing."

Kala considered that response. Only missing? But that seemed worse than being taken from this world. Living on the street, without home or family—that sounded like a horrible fate.

Guessing her daughter's mind, Mom added, "Either way, you're never going to live their lives."

Of course she wouldn't; Kala had no doubt about that.

Sandor appeared abruptly, followed by Father. Together they delivered the very bad news. Their old car needed a lot of work. A critical gasket was failing, and something was horribly wrong in the transmission. Repairs would take time and most of their money, which was a big problem. Or maybe not. Father had already given this matter some thought. The closest mountains weren't more than three hours away. Forced into a rational corner, he suggested camping in just one location. A base camp, if you would. This year, they couldn't visit the Grand Canyon or the Mormon Sea, much less enjoy the company of distant sisters. But they could spend ten lazy days in the high country, then return home with a few coins still rattling in their pockets.

Mom bowed to her husband, telling him, "It's your decision, dear."

"Then that's what we'll do," he said, borrowing a map from the counter. "I'll find a good place to pitch the tent. All right?"

Full of resolve, the men once again left. But Mom remained nervous, sitting forward in her chair—a heavy woman in matronly robes, her hair grayer than ever, thick fingers moving while her expression was stiff and unchanging.

Kala wanted to ask about her thoughts. Was she disappointed not to see her sisters? Or was she feeling guilty? Unless of course Mom was asking herself what else could be wrong with a car they had bought for almost nothing and done nothing to maintain.

The sudden deep hissing of brakes interrupted the silence. A traveler had pulled off the highway, parking beside the most distant gas pump. Kala saw the long sky-blue body and thought of a school bus. But the school's old name had been sanded off, the windows in the front covered

with iron bars, while the back windows were sealed with plywood. She knew exactly what the bus was. Supplies were stuffed in the back, she reasoned. And a lot more gear was tied up on the roof—bulky sacks running its full length, secured with ropes and rubber straps and protected from any rain with yellowing pieces of thick plastic.

A man stepped out into the midday glare. He wasn't young, or old. The emerald green shirt and black collar marked him as a member of the Church of Eden. Two pistols rode high on his belt. He looked handsome and strong, and, in ways Kala couldn't quite define, he acted competent in all matters important. After glancing up and down the highway, he stared into the open garage. Then he pulled out a keychain and locked the bus door, and he fed the gas nozzle into the big fuel tank, jamming in every possible drop.

Once again, the fix-it man had stopped working on their car. But unlike the other interruptions, he started to walk out toward the pump, a long wrench in one hand. The always-friendly face was gone. What replaced it wasn't unfriendly, but there was a sense of caution, and perhaps a touch of disapproval.

"No, sir," the younger gentleman called out. "I'll come in and pay."

"You don't have to—"

"Yeah, I do. Keep your distance now."

The fix-it man stopped walking, and after a moment, he turned and retreated.

The younger man hit the bus door once with the flat of his hand, shouting, "Two minutes."

By then, everybody had moved to the public room. Father glanced at the Lady's Room but then decided it wasn't necessary. He took his position behind Mom's chair, his sore red hands wrapped in gauze. Sandor hovered beside Kala. The fix-it man stood behind the counter, telling the women, "Don't worry," while opening a cupboard and pulling something heavy into position.

"It was a gun," Sandor later told his sister. "I caught a glimpse. A little splattergun. Loaded and ready, I would bet."

"But why?" Kala would wonder aloud.

"Because that green-shirt was leaving us," her brother reminded her. "Where he was going, there's no fix-it shops. No tools, no law. So what if he tried to steal a box of wrenches, you know?"

Maybe. But the man had acted more worried about them, as if he were afraid somebody would try to steal his prized possessions. Entering the room carefully, he announced, "My brother's still onboard."

"Good for him," said the fix-it man.

"How much do I owe?"

"Twenty and a third."

"Keep the change," he said, handing over two bills. The green-shirted man tried to smile, only it was a pained, forced grin. "Tell me, old man: Anybody ask about me today?"

"Like who?"

"Or anybody mention a bus looking like mine? Any gentlemen come by and inquire if you've seen us. . . ?"

The fix-it man shook his head, nothing like a smile on his worn face. "No, sir. Nobody's asked about you or your bus."

"Good." The green-shirted man yanked more money from the roll, setting it on the plastic countertop. "There's a blonde kid. If he stops by and asks . . . do me a favor? Don't tell him anything, but make him think you know shit."

The fix-it man nodded.

"He'll give you money for your answers. Take all you can. And then tell him I went north from here. Up the Red Highway to Paradise. You heard me say that. 'North to Paradise.'"

"But you're going somewhere else, I believe."

"Oh, a little ways." Laughing, the would-be Father turned and started back to his bus.

That's when Sandor asked, "Do you really have one?"

"Quiet," Father cautioned.

But the green-shirted man felt like smiling. He turned and looked at the thirteen-year-old-boy, asking, "Why? You interested in these things?"

"Sure I am."

Laughing, the man said, "I bet you are."

Sandor was small for his age, but he was bold and very smart about many subjects, and in circumstances where most people would feel afraid, he was at his bravest best. "A little Class D, is it?"

That got the man to look hard at him. "You think so?"

"Charged and ready," Sandor guessed. He named three possible manufacturers, and then said, "You've set it up in the aisle, I bet. Right in the middle of the bus."

"Is that how I should do it?"

"The rip-zone reaches out what? Thirty, thirty-five feet? Which isn't all that big."

"Big enough," said the man.

Just then, someone else began pulling on the bus horn. Maybe it was the unseen brother. Whoever it was, the horn was loud and insistent.

"You're not taking livestock," Kala's brother observed.

This time, Mom told Sandor to be quiet, and she even lifted a hand, as if to give him a pop on the head.

"Hedge-rabbits," the man said. "And purple-hens."

Both parents now said, "Quiet."

The horn honked again.

But the green-shirted man had to ask, "How would you do it, little man? If you were in my boots?"

"A Class-B ripper, at least," Sandor declared. "And I'd take better animals, too. Milking animals. And wouldn't bother with my brother, if I had my choice."

"By the looks of it, you don't have a brother."

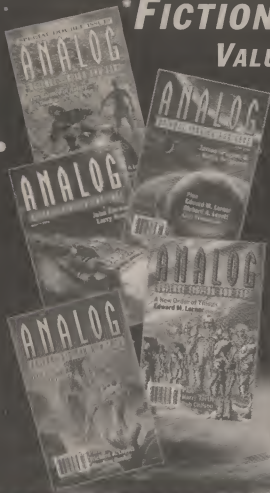
"So how many of them do you have?" Sandor asked. Just the tone of his voice told what he was asking. "Six?" he guessed. "Eight? Or is it ten?"

"Shush," Mom begged.

The green-shirted man said nothing.

"I'm just curious," the boy continued, relentlessly focused on the subject

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at hand. "Keep your gene pool as big as possible. That's what everybody says. In the books, they claim that's a good guarantee for success."

The man shook his longest finger at Sandor. "Why, little man? You think I should take along another? Just to be safe?"

In an instant, the room grew hot and tense.

The green-shirted man looked at both women. Then with a quiet, furious voice, he snarled, "Lucky for you ladies, I don't have any more seats." Then he turned and strode out to the bus and unlocked the door, vanishing inside as somebody else hurriedly drove the long vehicle away from the pump.

For several moments, everybody was enjoying hard, deep breaths.

Then the fix-it man said, "I see a pretty miserable future for that idiot."

"That's not any way to leave," Father agreed. "Can you imagine making a life for yourself with just that little pile of supplies?"

"Forget about him," Mom demanded. "Talk about anything else."

Alone, Kala returned to the poster displaying photographs of all the lost women. It occurred to her that one or two of those faces could have been on board the bus, and perhaps not by their own choice. But she also understood that no one here was going to call the proper authorities. The men would throw their insults at the would-be Father, and Mom would beg for a change in topics. But no one mentioned the idiot's poor wives. Even when Kala touched the prettiest faces and read their tiny biographies, it didn't occur to her that some strong brave voice should somehow find the words to complain.

2

No figure in history was half as important as the First Father. He was the reason why humans had come to this fine world, and every church owed its existence to him. Yet the man remained mysterious and elusive—an unknowable presence rooted deep in time and in the imagination. No two faiths ever drew identical portraits of their founder. A traditional biography was common to all schoolbooks, but what teachers offered was rather different from what a bright girl might find on the shelves of any large library. The truth was that the man was an enigma, and when it came to his story, almost everything was possible. The only common features were that he was born on the Old Earth in the last days of the twentieth century, and, on a Friday morning in spring, when he was a little more than twenty-nine years of age, the First Father claimed his destiny.

Humans had only recently built the first rippers. The machines were brutal, ill-tempered research tools, and physicists were using them to punch temporary holes in the local reality. Most of those holes led to hard vacuums and a fabulous cold; empty space is the standard state throughout most of the multiverse. But quantum effects and topological harmonics showed the way: If the ripper cut its hole along one of the invisible dimensions, an island of stability was waiting. The island had separated

from the Now two billion years ago, and on the other side of that hole were an infinite number of sister-earths, each endowed with the same motions and mass of the human earth.

Suddenly every science had a fierce interest in the work. Large schools and small nations had to own rippers. Biologists retrieved microscopic samples of air and soil, each sample contaminated with bacteria and odd spores. Every species was new, but all shared the ingredients of earth-life: DNA coded for the same few amino acids that built families of proteins that were not too unlike those found inside people and crabgrass.

The Creation was a tireless, boundless business. That's what human beings were learning. And given the proper tool and brief jolts of titanic energy, it was possible to reach into those infinite realms, examining a minuscule portion of the endlessness.

But rippers had a second, more speculative potential. If the same terrific energies were focused in a slightly different fashion, the hole would shift its shape and nature. That temporary disruption of space would spread along the three easiest dimensions, engulfing the machine and local landscape in a plasmatic bubble, and that bubble would act like a ship, carrying its cargo across a gap that was nearly too tiny to measure and too stubborn to let any normal matter pass.

Whoever he was, the First Father understood what rippers could do. Most churches saw him as a visionary scientist, while the typical historian thought he was too young for that role, describing him instead as a promising graduate student. And there were always a few dissenting voices claiming that he was just a laboratory technician or something of that ilk—a little person armed with just enough knowledge to be useful, as well as access to one working ripper.

Unnoticed, the First Father had absconded with a set of superconductive batteries, and, over the course of weeks and months, he secretly filled them with enough energy to illuminate a city. He also purchased or stole large quantities of supplies, including seeds and medicines, assorted tools, and enough canned goods to feed a hundred souls for months. Working alone, he crammed the supplies into a pair of old freight trucks, and, on the perfect night in April, he drove the trucks to a critical location, parking beside No Parking signs and setting their brakes and then flattening their tires. A third truck had to be maneuvered down the loading dock beside the physics laboratory, and, using keys or passwords, the young man gained access to one of the most powerful rippers on the planet—a bundle of electronics and bottled null-spaces slightly larger than a coffin.

The young man rolled or carried his prize into the vehicle, and with quick, well-rehearsed motions, he patched it into the fully charged batteries and spliced in fresh software. Then before anyone noticed, he gunned the truck's motor, driving off into the darkness.

Great men are defined by their great, brave deeds; every worthy faith recognizes this unimpeachable truth.

According to most accounts, the evening was exceptionally warm, wet with dew, and promising a beautiful day. At four in the morning, the First Father scaled a high curb and inched his way across a grassy front yard,

slipping between an oak tree and a ragged spruce before parking tight against his target—a long white building decorated with handsome columns and black letters pulled from a dead language. Then he turned off the engine, and perhaps for a moment or two, he sat motionless. But no important doubts crept into his brave skull. Alone, he climbed down and opened the back door and turned on the stolen ripper, and, with a few buttons pushed, he let the capacitors eat the power needed to fuel a string of nanosecond bursts.

Many accounts of that night have survived; no one knows which, if any, are genuine. When Kala was eleven, her favorite story was about a young student who was still awake at that early hour, studying hard for a forgotten examination. The girl thought it was odd to hear the rumbling of a diesel motor and then the rattling of a metal door. But her room was at the back of the sorority house; she couldn't see anything but the parking lot and a tree-lined alley. What finally caught her attention was the ripper's distinctive whine—a shriek almost too high for the human ear—punctuated with a series of hard little explosions. Fresh holes were being carved in the multiverse, exposing the adjacent worlds. Tiny breaths of air were retrieved, each measured against a set of established parameters. Hearing the blasts, the girl stood and stepped to her window. And that's when the ripper paused for a moment, a hundred trillion calculations made before it fired again. The next *pop* sounded like thunder. Every light went out, and the campus vanished, and a sphere of ground and grass, air and wood was wrenched free of one world. The full length of the house was taken, and its entire yard, as well as both supply trucks and the street in front of the house and the parking lot and a piece of the alley behind it. And emerging out of nothingness was a new world—a second glorious offering from God, Our Ultimate Father.

The girl was the only witness to a historic event, which was why the young Kala found her tale so appealing.

The First Father saw nothing. At the pivotal moment of his life, he was hunkered over the stolen ripper, reading data and receiving prompts from the AI taskmaster.

The girl started to run. By most accounts she was a stocky little creature, not pretty but fearless and immodest. Half-dressed, she dashed through the darkened house, screaming for the other girls to wake up, then diving down the stairs and out the front door. Kala loved the fact that here was the first human being to take a deep breath on another earth. The air was thick and unsatisfying. Out from the surrounding darkness came living sounds. Strange creatures squawked and hollered, and flowing branches waved in a thin moonlight. The girl thought to look at the sky, and she was rewarded with more stars than she had ever seen in her life. (Every sister world is a near-twin, as are the yellow sun and battered moon. But the movement of the solar system is a highly chaotic business, and you never know where inside the Milky Way you might end up.) Standing on sidewalk, the girl slowly absorbed the astonishing scene. Then she heard pounding, and, when she turned, she saw the long truck parked against a tangle of juniper shrubs. On bare feet, she climbed into the back end and over a stack of cold black batteries. The First Father

was too busy to notice her. One job was finished, but another essential task needed his undivided attention. Having brought a hundred young women to an empty, barely livable world, the man had no intention of letting anyone escape now. Which was why he wrenched open the hot ripper, exposing its intricate guts, and why he was using a crowbar to batter its weakest systems—too consumed by his work to notice one of his future wives standing near him, wearing nothing but pants and a bra and a slightly mesmerized expression.

3

For more than a week, Kala's family lived inside a borrowed tent, and without doubt, they never enjoyed a better vacation than this. The campground was a rough patch of public land set high on a mountainside. Scattered junipers stood on the sunny ground and dense spruce woods choked an adjacent canyon. A stream was tucked inside the canyon, perfect for swimming and baths. A herd of semi-tame roodeer grazed where they wanted. Rilly birds and starlings greeted each morning with songs and hard squawks. Their tent was in poor condition, ropes missing and its roof ripped and then patched by clumsy hands. But a heat wave erased any danger of rain, and, even after the hottest days, nights turned pleasantly chilly, illuminated by a moon that was passing through full.

Kala was the perfect age for adventures like these: Young enough to remember everything, yet old enough to explore by herself. Because this wasn't a popular destination, the woods felt as if they belonged to her. And best of all, higher in the mountains was a sprawling natural reserve.

Where her brother loved machinery, Kala adored living creatures.

By law, the reserve was supposed to be a pristine wilderness. No species brought into this world could live behind its high fences. But of course starlings flew where they wanted, and gold-weed spores wandered on the softest wind, and even the best intentions of visitors didn't prevent people from bringing seeds stuck to their clothing or weaknesses tucked into their hearts.

One morning they drove into the high alpine country—a risky adventure, since their car still ran hot and leaked antifreeze. The highway was narrow and forever twisting. A shaggy black forest of native trees gave way to clouds, damp and cold. Father slowed until the following drivers began to pull on their horns, and then he sped up again, emerging onto a tilted, rock-strewn landscape where black fuzz grew beside last winter's snow. Scenic pullouts let them stop and marvel at an utterly alien world. Kala and her brother made snowballs and gamely posed for pictures on the continental divide. Then Father turned them around and drove even slower through the clouds and black forest. In the same instant, everyone announced: "I'm hungry!" And because this was a magical trip, a clearing instantly appeared, complete with a wide glacial stream and a red granite table built specifically for them.

Lunch was tortoise sandwiches and sour cherries. The clouds were

thickening, and there were distant rumblings of thunder. But if there was rain, it fell somewhere else. Kala sat backwards at the table, smelling the stream and the light peppery stink of the strange trees. Despite a lifetime spent reading books and watching documentaries, she was unprepared for this divine place. It was an endless revelation, the idea that here lived creatures that had ruled this world until the arrival of humans. If the local climate had been warmer and the soil better, this reserve couldn't have survived. She was blessed. In ways new to her, the girl felt happy. Gazing into the shadows, she imagined native rock-lambs and tomb-tombs and the lumbering Harry's-big-days. In her daily life, the only animals were those that came with the Last Father—the roodeer and starlings and such. And their crops and a few hundred species of wild plants came here as seeds and spores that people had intentionally carried along. But these great old mountains wore a different order, a fresh normalcy. The shaggy black forest looked nothing like spruce trees, bearing a lovely useless wood too soft to be used as lumber, and always too wet to burn.

A narrow form suddenly slipped from one shadow to the next.

What could that have been?

Kala rose slowly. Her brother was immersed in a fat adventure novel. Her parents glanced her way, offering smiles before returning to the subject at hand: What, if anything, would they do with the afternoon and evening? With a stalker's pace, Kala moved into the forest—into the cool spicy delicious air—and then she paused again, eyes unblinking, her head cocked to one side while she listened to the deep booming of thunder as it curled around the mountain flanks.

A dry something touched Kala on the back of the calf.

She flinched, looking down.

The housefly launched itself, circling twice before settling on her bare arm. Kala never liked to kill, but this creature didn't belong here. It was one of the creatures humans always brought—by chance, originally, and now cherished because maggots could be useful disposing of trash. With the palm of her right hand, she managed to stun the creature, and then she knelt, using eyes and fingers to find its fallen body, two fingertips crushing the vermin to an anonymous paste.

Sitting nearby, studying Kala, was a wild cat. She noticed it as she stood again—a big male tabby, well fed and complacent, caught in a large wire trap. Cat-shaped signs were posted across the reserve, warning visitors about feral predators. These animals were ecological nightmares. During its life, a single killing machine could slaughter thousands of the native wisp-mice and other delicate species; and a male cat was the worst, since it could also father dozens of new vermin that would only spread the carnage.

Kala approached the cat, knelt down and looked into its bright green eyes. Except for the tangled fur, nothing about the animal looked especially wild. When she offered her hand, the cat responded by touching her fingertips with the cool end of its nose. Exotics like this were always killed. No exceptions. But maybe she could catch it and take it home. If she begged hard enough, how could her parents refuse? Kala studied the

mechanism of the trap and found a strong stick and slipped it into a gap, and then with a hard shove, she forced the steel door to pop open.

The cat had always been wild, and it knew what to do. As soon as the door vanished, Kala reached for its neck, but her quarry was quicker. It sprinted back into the dark shadows, leaving behind a young girl to think many thoughts, but mostly feeling guilt mixed with a tenacious, unexpected relief.

"Find anything?" Father asked on her return.

"Nothing," she lied.

"Next time," he advised, "take the camera."

"We haven't seen a tomb-tombs yet," her mother added. "Before we leave, I'd like to have a close look at them."

Kala sat beside her brother, and he glanced up from his book, investing a few moments watching her as she silently finished her sandwich.

Later that day, they visited a tiny museum nestled in a wide black meadow. Like favored students on a field trip, they wandered from exhibit to exhibit, absorbing little bits of knowledge about how these mountains were built and why the glaciers had come and gone again. Display cases were jammed with fossils, and in the basement were artifacts marking these last centuries when humans played their role. But the memorable heart of the day was a stocky, homely woman who worked for the reserve—a strong, raspy-voiced lady wearing a drab brown uniform complete with a wide-brimmed hat and fat pockets and an encyclopedic knowledge on every imaginable subject.

Her job was to lead tourists along the lazy trail that circled her museum grounds. Her practiced voice described this world as well as each of its known neighbors. From the First Father to the Last, seventeen examples of the Creation had been settled, while another fifty worlds had been visited but found unsuitable. The Old Earth and its sisters belonged to one endless family, each world sharing the same essential face: There was always a Eurasia and Africa, an Australia and two Americas. The North Pole was water, while islands or a single continent lay on the South Pole. Except for the fickle effects of erosion, landmasses were constant. Two billion years of separation wasn't enough to make any earth forget which family it belonged to.

But where stone and tectonics were predictable, other qualities were not. Minuscule factors could shift climates or the composition of an atmosphere. Some earths were wet and warm. Kala's earth, for instance. Most had similar atmospheres, but none was identical to any other. A few earths were openly inhospitable to humanity. Oxygen cycles and methane cycles were famously temperamental. Sometimes life generated enough greenhouse gas to scorch the land, lifting the oceans into a cloud-born biosphere. Other earths had been permanently sterilized by impacting comets or passing supernovae. Yet those traps were easy to spot with a working ripper; little bites of air warned the Fathers about the most deadly places. What the woman lecturer discussed, and in astonishing depth, were worlds that only seemed inviting. Everyone knew examples from history. After a hard year or two, or, in the case of Mattie's House, a

full ten years of misery, the reigning Father had realized there was no hope, and, gathering up his pioneers, he used the ripper's remaining power to leap to another, more favorable world.

"We have a wonderful home," the woman declared, leaning against one of the native trees. "A long Ice Age has just released this land, giving us a favorable climate. And the northern soils have been bulldozed to the warm south, making the black ground we always name Iowa and Ohio and Ukraine."

Her praise of their world earned grateful nods from tourists.

"And we're blessed in having so much experience," she continued. "Our ancestors learned long ago what to bring and how to adapt. Our culture is designed to grow quickly, and by every measure. Ten centuries is not a long time—not to a world or even to a young species like ours—but that's all the time we needed here to make a home for five billion of us."

Smiles rode the nodding faces.

"But we're most blessed in this way," she said. Then she paused, letting her wise old eyes take their measure of her audience. "We are awfully lucky because this world is extremely weak. For reasons known and reasons only guessed at, natural selection took its sweet time here. These native life forms are roughly equivalent to the First Earth during its long ago Permian. The smartest tomb-tombs isn't smart at all. And as any good Father knows, intelligence is the first quality to measure when you arrive at a new home."

Kala noticed the adults' approval. Here was the central point; the woman was speaking to the young men in her audience, giving them advice should they ever want to become a Father.

One hand lifted, begging to be seen.

"Yes, sir," said the lecturer. "A question?"

"I could ask a question, I suppose." The hand belonged to an elderly gentleman with the pale brown eyes of the First Father as well as his own thick mane of white hair. "Mostly, I was going to offer my observations. This morning, I was hiking the trail to Passion Lake—"

"A long walk," the woman interjected, perhaps trying to compliment his endurance.

"I was bitten by mosquitoes," he announced. "Nothing new about that, I suppose. And I saw rilly birds nesting in one of your false-spruces." The rillies were native to the Second Father's world. "And I'm quite sure I saw mice—our mice—in the undergrowth. Which looked an awful lot like oleo-weed when it's gone wild."

Oleo-weed was from the First Father's world, and it had been a human companion for the last twenty thousand years.

The lecturer adjusted her big-brimmed hat as she nodded, acting unperturbed. "We have a few exotics on the reserve," she agreed. "Despite our rules and restrictions—"

"Is this right?" the white-haired man interrupted.

"Pardon me?"

"Right," he repeated. "Correct. Responsible. What we are doing here . . . is it worth the damage done to a helpless planet. . . ?"

More than anything, the audience was either puzzled by his attitude or

completely indifferent. Half of the tourists turned away, pretending to take a burning interest in random rocks or the soft peculiar bark of the trees.

The lecturer pulled the mountain air across her teeth. "There are estimates," she began. "I'm sure everybody here has seen the figures. The First Father was the first pioneer, but he surely wasn't the only one to lead people away from the Old Earth. Yet even if you count only that one man and his wives, and if you make a conservative estimate of how many Fathers sprang up from that first world . . . and then you assume that half of those Fathers built homes filled with young people and their own wandering hearts . . . that means that by now, millions of colony worlds have been generated by that first example. And each of those millions might have founded another million or so worlds—"

"An exponential explosion," the man interjected.

"Inside an endless Creation, as we understand these things." She spoke with a grim delight. "No limit to the worlds, no end to the variety. And why shouldn't humanity claim as much of that infinity as he can?"

"Then I suppose all of this has to be moral," the white-haired man added, the smile pleasant but his manner sarcastic. "I guess my point is, madam . . . you and those like you are eventually going to discover yourselves without employment. Because there will be a day, and soon, when this lovely ground is going to look like every other part of our world, thick with the same weeds and clinging creatures we know best, and exactly the same as the twenty trillion other human places."

"Yes," said the woman, her satisfaction obvious. "That is the future, yes."

The lecturer wasn't looking at Kala, but every word felt as if it had been aimed her way. For the first time in her life, she saw an inevitable future. She loved this alien forest, but it couldn't last. An endless doom lay over the landscape, and she wanted to weep. Even her brother noticed her pain, smiling warily while he asked, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

She couldn't say. She didn't know how to define her mind's madness. Yet afterwards, making the journey back to the parking lot, she thought again of that wildcat; and with a fury honest and pure, she wished that she had left the creature inside that trap. Or better, that she had used that long stick of hers and beaten it to death.

4

The most devoted wives left behind written accounts of their adventures on the new world—the seven essential books in the First Father's Testament. Quite a few churches also included the two Sarah diaries, while the more progressive faiths, such as the one Kala's family belonged to, made room for the Six Angry Wives. Adding to the confusion were the dozens if not hundreds of texts and fragmentary accounts left behind by lesser-known voices, as well as those infamous documents generally regarded to be fictions at best, and, at worst, pure heresies.

When Kala was twelve, an older girl handed her a small, cat-eared booklet. "I didn't give this to you," the girl warned. "Read it and then give it to somebody else, or burn it. Promise me?"

"I promise."

Past Fathers had strictly forbidden this testament, but someone always managed to smuggle at least one copy to the next world. *The First Mother's Tale* was said to be a third-person account of Claire, the fifty-year-old widow whose job it had been to watch over the sorority house and its precious girls. Claire was a judicious, pragmatic woman—qualities missing in her own mother, Kala realized sadly. On humanity's most important day, the housemother woke to shouts and wild weeping. She threw on a bathrobe and stepped into slippers before leaving her private ground-floor apartment. Urgent arms grabbed her up and dragged her down a darkened hallway. A dozen terrified voices were rambling on about some horrible disaster. The power was out, Claire noticed. Yet she couldn't find any trace of cataclysms. The house walls were intact. There was no obvious fire or flood. Whatever the disturbance, it had been so minor that even the framed photographs of Delta sisters were still neatly perched on their usual nails.

Then Claire stepped out the front door, and hesitated. Two long trucks were parked in the otherwise empty street. But where was the campus? Past the trucks, exactly where the Fine Arts building should be, a rugged berm had been made of gray dirt and gray stone and shattered tree trunks. Beyond the berm was a forest of strange willowy trees. Nameless odors and a dense gray mist were drifting out of the forest on a gentle wind. And illuminated by the moon and endless stars was a flock of leathery creatures, perched together on the nearest limbs, hundreds of simple black eyes staring at the newcomers.

The First Father was sitting halfway down the front steps, a deer rifle cradled in his lap, a box of ammunition between his feet, hands trembling while the pale brown eyes stared out at the first ruddy traces of the daylight.

Women were still emerging from every door, every fire escape. Alone and in little groups, they would wander to the edge of their old world, the bravest ones climbing the berm to catch a glimpse of the strange landscape before retreating again, gathering together on the damp lawn while staring at the only man in their world.

Claire pulled her robe tight and walked past the First Father.

No life could have prepared her for that day, yet she found the resolve to smile in a believable fashion, offering encouraging words and calculated hugs. She told her girls that everything would be fine. She promised they'd be home again in time for classes. Then she turned her attentions to the third truck. It was parked beside the house, its accordion door raised and its loading ramp dropped to the grass. Claire climbed the ramp and stared at the strange, battered machinery inside. The young woman who had heard the ripper in operation—the only witness to their leap across invisible dimensions—was telling her story to her sisters, again and again. Claire listened. Then she gathered the handful of physics majors and asked if the ripper was authentic. It was. Could it re-

ally do these awful things? Absolutely. Claire inhaled deeply and hugged herself, then asked if there was any possible way, with everything they knew and the tools at hand, that this awful-looking damage could be fixed?

No, it couldn't be. And even if there was some way to patch it up, nobody here would ever see home again.

"Why not?" Claire asked, refusing to give in. "Maybe not with this ripper-machine, no. But why not build a new one with the good parts here and new components that we make ourselves. . . ?"

One young woman was an honor student—a senior ready to graduate with a double major in physics and mathematics. Her name, as it happened, was Kala—a coincidence that made one girl's heart quicken as she read along. That ancient Kala provided the smartest, most discouraging voice. There wouldn't be any cobbling together of parts, she maintained. Many times, she had seen the ripper used, and she had even helped operate it on occasion. As much as anyone here, she understood its powers and limitations. Navigating through the multiverse was just this side of impossible. To Claire and a few of her sisters, the First Kala explained how the Creation was infinite, and how every cubic nanometer of their world contained trillions of potential destinations.

"Alien worlds?" asked Claire.

"Alternate earths," Kala preferred. "More than two billion years ago, the world around us split away from our earth."

"Why?"

"Quantum rules," said Kala, explaining nothing. "Every world is constantly dividing into a multitude of new possibilities. There's some neat and subtle harmonics at play, and I don't understand much of it. But that's why the rippers can find earths like this. Two billion years and about half a nanometer divide our home from this place."

That was a lot for a housemother to swallow, but Claire did her best.

Kala continued spelling out their doom. "Even if we could repair the machine—do it right now, with a screwdriver and two minutes of work—our earth is lost. Finding it would be like finding a single piece of dust inside a world made of dust. It's that difficult. That impossible. We're trapped here, and Owen knows it. And that's part of his plan, I bet."

"Owen?" the First Mother asked. "Is that his name?"

Kala nodded, glancing back at the armed man.

"So you know Owen, do you?"

Kala rolled her eyes as women do when they feel uncomfortable in a certain man's presence. "He's a graduate student in physics," she explained. "I don't know him that well. He's got a trust fund, supposedly, and he's been stuck on his master's thesis for years." Then with the next breath, she confessed, "We went out once. Last year. Once, or maybe twice. Then I broke it off."

Here was a staggering revelation for the living Kala: The woman who brought her name to the new world had a romantic relationship with the First Father. And then she had rejected him. Perhaps Owen still loved the girl, Kala reasoned. He loved her and wanted to possess her. And what if this enormous deed—the basis for countless lives and loves—came from one bitter lover's revenge?

But motivations never matter as much as results.

Whatever Owen's reasons, women sobbed while other women sat on the lawn, knees to their faces, refusing to believe what their senses told them. Claire stood motionless, absorbing what Kala and the other girls had to tell her. Meanwhile a sun identical to their sun rose, the air instantly growing warmer. Then the winged natives swept in low, examining the newcomers with their empty black eyes. A giant beast not unlike a tortoise, only larger than most rooms, calmly crawled over the round berm, sliding down to the lawn where it happily began to munch on grass. Meanwhile, houseflies and termites, dandelion fluff and blind earthworms, were beginning their migrations into the new woods. Bumblebees and starlings left their nests in search of food, while carpenter ants happily chewed on the local timber. Whatever you believe about the First Father, one fact is obvious: He was an uncommonly fortunate individual. The first new world proved to be a lazy place full of corners and flavors that earth species found to their liking. Included among the lucky colonists were two stray cats. One was curled up inside a storage shed, tending to her newborn litter, while the other was no more than a few days pregnant. And into that genetic puddle were added three kittens smuggled into the sorority house by a young woman whose identity, and perhaps her own genetics, had long ago vanished from human affairs.

On that glorious morning, two worlds were married.

Each Testament had its differences, and every story was believable, but only to a maybe-so point. Claire's heretical story was the version Kala liked best and could even believe—a sordid tale of women trapped in awful circumstances but doing their noble best to survive.

"Hello, Owen," said Claire.

The young man blinked, glancing at the middle-aged woman standing before him. Claire was still wearing her bathrobe and a long nightgown and old slippers. To Owen, the woman couldn't have appeared less interesting. He nodded briefly and said nothing, always staring into the distance, eyes dancing from excitement but a little sleepiness creeping into their corners.

"What are you doing, Owen?"

"Standing guard," he said, managing a tense pride.

With the most reasonable voice possible, she asked, "What are you guarding us from?"

The young man said nothing.

"Owen," she repeated. Once. Twice. Then twice more.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, watching a single leather-wing dance in the air overhead. "There's a gauge on the ripper. It says our oxygen is about 80 percent usual. It's going to be like living in the mountains. So I'm sorry about that. I set the parameters too wide. At least for now, we're going to have to move slowly and let our bodies adapt."

Claire sighed. Then one last time, she asked, "What are you guarding us from, Owen?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You don't know what's out there?"

"No." He shrugged his shoulders, both hands gripping the stock of the

rifle. "I saw you and Kala talking. Didn't she tell you? There's no way to tell much about a new world. The ripper can taste its air, and if it finds free oxygen and water and marker molecules that mean you're very close to the ground—"

"You kidnapped us, Owen." She spoke firmly, with a measured heat. "Without anyone's permission, you brought us here and marooned us."

"I'm marooned too," he countered.

"And why should that make us feel better?"

Finally, Owen studied the woman. Perhaps for the first time, he was gaining an appreciation for this unexpected wild card.

"Feel how you want to feel," he said, speaking to her and everyone else in range of his voice. "This is our world now. We live or die here. We can make something out of our circumstances, or we can vanish away."

He wasn't a weak man, and, better than most people could have done, he had prepared for this incredible day. By then, Claire had realized some of that. Yet what mattered most was to get the man to admit the truth. That's why she climbed the steps, forcing him to stare at her face. "Are you much of a shot, Owen? Did you serve in the military? In your little life, have you even once gone hunting?"

He shook his head. "None of those things, no."

"I have," Claire promised. "I served in the Army. My dead husband used to take me out chasing quail. When I was about your age, I shot a five-point whitetail buck."

Owen didn't know what to make of that news. "Okay. Good, I guess."

Claire kept her eyes on him. "Did you bring other guns?"

"Why?"

"Because you can't look everywhere at once," she reminded him. "I could ask a couple of these ladies to climb on the roof, just to keep tabs on things. And maybe we should decide who can shoot, if it actually comes to that and we have to defend the house."

Owen took a deep, rather worried breath. "I hope that doesn't happen."

"Are there more guns?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

His eyes tracked to the right.

"In that truck?" Claire glanced over her shoulder. "The women checked the doors. They're locked, aren't they?"

"Yes."

"To keep us out? Is that it?"

He shifted his weight, and with a complaining tone said, "I can't see much, with you in the way."

"I guess not," Claire responded. Then she pushed closer, asking, "Do you know the combinations of those padlocks?"

"Sure."

"Are you going to open them?"

Silence.

"All right," she said. "I guess that's just a little problem for now."

Owen nodded, pretending to be in complete control, set his rifle to one side, looked at her, and said, "I guess it is."

"You're what's important. You are essential."

"You bet."

"And for reasons bigger than a few locks."

The young man had to smile.

"What's inside the trucks?"

He quickly summarized the wealth brought from the old world, then happily added, "It's a great beginning for our colony."

"That does sound wonderful," Claire replied, her voice dipped in sarcasm.

Owen smiled, hearing the words but missing their color.

"And if you could please tell me . . . when do you intend to give us this good food and water? Does your generosity have a timetable?"

"It does."

"So tell me."

Owen offered a smug wink, and then he sat back on the hard steps, lifting a hand, showing her three fingers.

"Excuse me?"

"Three girls," he explained. Then the hand dropped, and he added, "You know what I mean."

Here was another revelation: In every official Testament, the First Father unlocked every door and box in the first few minutes. Without exception, he was gracious and caring, and the girls practically fought one another for the chance to sleep with him.

"You want three of my ladies. . . ?"

"Yes."

Rage stole away Claire's voice.

Again, Owen said, "Yes."

"Are you going to select them?" the housemother muttered. "Or is this going to be a job for volunteers?"

Every face was fixed on Owen, and he clearly enjoyed the attention. He must have dreamed for months about this one moment, imagining the tangible, irresistible power that no one could deny . . . and because of that strength, he could shrug his shoulders, admitting, "It doesn't matter who. If there's three volunteers, then that's fine."

"You want them now?"

"Or in a week. I can wait, if I have to."

"You don't have to."

The smile brightened. "Good."

"And you get just one woman," Claire warned, grabbing the belt of her bathrobe and tightening the sloppy knot. "Me."

"No."

"Yes." Claire touched him on a knee. "No other deal is on the table, Owen. You and I are going inside. Now. My room, my bed, and afterwards, you're going to get us into those trucks, and you'll hand over every weapon you brought here. Is that understood?"

The young man's face colored. "You're not in any position—"

"Owen," she interrupted. Then she said, "Darling," with a bite to her voice. And she reached out with the hand not on his knee, grabbing his bony chin while staring into the faint brown eyes that eventually would

find themselves scattered across endless worlds. "This may come as news to you. But most men of your age and means and apparent intelligence don't have to go to these lengths to get their dicks wet."

He flinched, just for an instant.

"You don't know very much about women. Do you, Owen?"

"I do."

"Bullshit."

He blinked, biting his lower lip.

"You don't know us," she whispered to him. "Let me warn you about the nature of women, Owen. Everyone here is going to realize that you're just a very ignorant creature. If they don't know it already, that is. And if you think you've got power over us . . . well, let's just say you have some very strange illusions that need to die. . . ."

"Quiet," he whispered.

But Claire kept talking, reminding him, "In another few weeks, a couple months at most, you will be doomed."

"What do you mean?"

"Once enough girls are pregnant, we won't need you anymore."

All the careful planning, but he hadn't let himself imagine this one obvious possibility. He said as much with his stiff face and the backward tilt of his frightened body.

"You can have all the guns in the world—hell, you do have all the guns—but you're going to end up getting knifed in bed. Yes, that could happen, Owen. Then in another few years, when your sons are old enough and my Deltas are in their late thirties . . . they'll still be young enough to use those boys' little seeds. . . ."

"No," he muttered.

"Yes," she said. Her hand squeezed his knee. "Or maybe we could arrive at a compromise. Surrender your guns and open every lock, and afterwards, maybe you can try to do everything in your power to make this mess a little more bearable for us . . ."

"And what do I get?"

"You live to be an old man. And if you're an exceptionally good man from here on, maybe your grandchildren will forgive you for what you've done. And if you're luckier than you deserve to be, perhaps they'll even like you."

5

When Kala was fourteen, her church acquired the means to send one hundred blessed newlyweds off to another world. United Manufacturing had built a class-B ripper specifically for them. Tithes and government grants paid for the machine, while the stockpiles of critical supplies came through direct donations as well as a few wealthy benefactors. A standard hemispherical building was erected in an isolated field, its dimensions slightly smaller than the ripper's reach. Iron and copper plates

made the rounded walls, nickel and tin and other useful metals forming the interior ribs, and secured to the roof were a few pure gold trimmings. The ground beneath had been excavated, dirt replaced with a bed of high-grade fertilizer and an insulated fuel tank set just under the bright steel floor. No portion of the cavernous interior was wasted: The young couples were taking foodstuffs and clean water, sealed animal pens and elaborate seed stocks, plus generators and earth-movers, medicine enough to keep an entire city fit, and the intellectual supplies necessary to build civilization once again.

On the wedding day, the congregation was given its last chance to see what the sacrifices had purchased. Several thousand parishioners gathered in long patient lines, donning sterile gloves and filter masks, impermeable sacks tied about their feet. Why chance giving some disease to the livestock or leaving rust spores on the otherwise sterile steel floor? The young pioneers stood in the crisscrossing hallways, brides dressed in white gowns, grooms in taut black suits, all wearing masks and gloves. One of the benefits born from the seventeen previous migrations was that most communicable diseases had been left behind. Only sinus colds and little infections born from mutating *staph* and *strep* were a problem. Yet even there, it was hoped that this migration would bring the golden moment, humanity finally escaping even those minor ailments.

The youngest brides were only a few years older than Kala, and she knew them well enough to make small talk before wishing them good-bye with the standard phrase, "Blessings in your new world."

Every girl's mask was wet with tears. Each was weeping for her own reason, but Kala was at a loss to guess who felt what. Some probably adored their temporary fame, while other girls cried out of simple stage fright. A few lucky brides probably felt utter love for their husbands-to-be, while others saw this mission as a holy calling. But some of the girls had to be genuinely terrified: The smartest few probably awoke this morning to the realization that they were doomed, snared in a vast and dangerous undertaking that had never quite claimed their hearts.

Standing near the burly ripper—a place of some honor—was a girl named Tina. Speaking through her soggy mask, she said to Kala, "May you find your new world soon."

"And bless you in yours."

Kala had no interest in emigrating. But what else could she say? Tina was soon to vanish, and the girl had always been friendly to Kala. Named for the first wife to give a son to the First Father, Tina was short and a little stocky, and, by most measures, not pretty. But her father was a deacon, and more important, her grandmother had offered a considerable dowry to the family that took her grandchild. Was the bride-to-be aware of these political dealings? And if so, did it matter to her? Tina seemed genuinely thrilled by her circumstances, giggling and pulling Kala closer, sounding like a very best friend when she asked, "Isn't this a beautiful day?"

"Yes," Kala lied.

"And tomorrow will be better still. Don't you think?"

The mass marriage would be held this evening, and come dawn, the big ripper would roar to life.

"Tomorrow will be different," Kala agreed, suddenly tired of their game.

Behind Tina, wrapped in thick plastic, was the colony's library. Ten thousand classic works were etched into sheets of tempered glass, each sheet thin as a hair and guaranteed to survive ten thousand years of weather and hard use. Among those works were the writings of every Father and the Testaments of the Fifteen Wives, plus copies of the ancient textbooks that the Deltas brought from the Old Earth. As language evolved, the texts had been translated. Kala had digested quite a few of them, including the introductions to ecology and philosophy, the fat histories of several awful wars, and an astonishing fable called *Huckster Finn*.

Tina noticed her young friend staring at the library. "I'm not a reader," she confided. "Not like you are, Kala."

The girl was rather simple, it was said.

"But I'm bringing my books too." Only the bride's brown eyes were visible, dark eyebrows acquiring a mischievous look. "Ask me what I'm taking."

"What are you taking, Tina?"

She mentioned several unremarkable titles. Then after a dramatic pause, she said, "*The Duty of Eve*. I'm taking that too."

Kala flinched.

"Don't tell anybody," the girl begged.

"Why would I?" Kala replied. "You can carry whatever you want, inside your wedding trunk."

The Duty was popular among conservative faiths. Historians claimed it was written by an unnamed Wife on the second new world—a saintly creature who died giving birth to her fifth son, but left behind a message from one of God's good angels: Suffering was noble, sacrifice led to purity, and if your children walked where no one had walked before, your life had been worth every misery.

"Oh, Kala. I always wanted to know you better," Tina continued. "I mean, you're such a beautiful girl, and smart. But you know that already, don't you?"

Kala couldn't think of a worthwhile response.

With both hands, Tina held tight to Kala's arm. "I have an extra copy of *The Duty*. I'll let you have it, if you want."

She said, "No."

"Think about it."

"I don't want it—"

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Kala blurted. "I don't want that damned book." Then she yanked her arm free and hurried away.

Tina stared after her, anger fading into subtler, harder to name emotions.

Kala felt the eyes burning against her neck, and she was a little bit ashamed for spoiling their last moments together. But the pain was brief. After all, she had been nothing but polite. It was the stupid girl who ruined everything.

According to *The Duty*, every woman's dream was to surrender to one

great man. Kala had read enough excerpts to know too much. The clumsy, relentless point of that idiotic old book was that a holy girl found her great man, and she did everything possible to sleep with him, even if that meant sharing his body with a thousand other wives. The best historians were of one mind on this matter: *The Duty* wasn't a revelation straight from God, or even some second-tier angel. It was a horny man's fantasy written down in some lost age, still embraced by the conniving and believed by every fool.

Kala walked fast, muttering to herself.

Sandor was standing beside the ripper, chatting amiably with the newly elected Next Father. Her brother had become a strong young man, stubborn and charming and very handsome, and, by most measures, as smart as any sixteen-year-old could be. He often spoke about leaving the world, but only if he was elected to a Next Father's post. That was how it was done in their church: One bride for each groom, and the most deserving couple was voted authority over the new colony.

"It's a good day," Sandor sang out. "Try smiling."

Kala pushed past him, down the crowded aisle and out into the fading sunshine.

Sandor excused himself and followed. He would always be her older brother, and that made him protective as well as sensitive to her feelings. He demanded to know what was wrong, and she told him. Then he knew exactly what to say. "The girl's as stupid as she is homely, and what does it matter to you?"

Nothing. It didn't matter at all, of course.

"Our world's going to be better without her," he promised.

But another world would be polluted as a consequence: A fact that Kala couldn't forget, much less forgive.

The marriage was held at dusk, on a wide meadow of mowed spring fescue. The regional bishop—a charming and wise old gentleman—begged God and His trusted angels to watch over these good brave souls. Then with a joyful, almost giddy tone, he warned the fifty new couples to love one another in the world they were going to build. "Hold to your monogamy," he called out. "Raise a good family together, and fill the wonderland where destiny has called you."

A reception was held in the same meadow, under temporary lights, the mood slipping from celebration to grief and back again. Everyone drank more than was normal. Eventually the newlyweds slipped off to the fifty small huts standing near the dome-shaped building. Grooms removed the white gowns of their brides, and the new wives folded the gowns and stored them inside watertight wooden trunks, along with artifacts and knickknacks from a life they would soon abandon.

Kala couldn't help but imagine what happened next inside the huts.

A few sips of wine made her warm and even a little happy. She chatted with friends and adults, and she even spent a few minutes listening to her father. He was drunk and silly, telling her how proud he was of her. She was so much smarter than he had ever been, and prettier even than her mother. "Did I just say that? Don't tell on me, Kala." Then he continued,

claiming that whatever she wanted from her life was fine with him . . . just so long as she was happy enough to smile like she was smiling right now. . . .

Kala loved the dear man, but he didn't mean those words. Sober again, he would find some way to remind her that Sandor was his favorite child. Flashing his best grin, he would mention her brother's golden aspirations and then talk wistfully about his grandchildren embracing their own world.

Kala finally excused herself, needing a bathroom.

Abandoning the meadow, walking alone in darkness, she considered her father's drunken promise to let her live her own life. But what was "her life"? The question brought pressure, and not just from parents and teachers and her assorted friends. Kala's own ignorance about her future was the worst of it. Such a bright creature—everyone said that about her. But when it came to her destiny, she didn't have so much as a clue.

As Kala walked through the oak woods, she noticed another person moving somewhere behind her. But she wasn't frightened until she paused, and an instant later, that second set of feet stopped too.

Kala turned, intending to glance over her shoulder.

Suddenly a cool black sack was dropped over her head, and an irresistible strength pushed her to the ground. Then a man's voice—a vaguely familiar voice—whispered into one of her covered ears. "Fight me," he said, "and I'll kill you. Make one sound, and I'll kill your parents too."

She was numb, empty and half-dead.

Her abductor tied her up and gagged her with a rope fitted over the black sack, and then he dragged her in a new direction, pausing at a service entrance in back of the metal dome. She heard fingers pushing buttons and hinges squeaking, and then the ground turned to steel as her long legs were dragged across the pioneers' floor.

Her numbness vanished, replaced with wild terror.

Blindly, Kala swung her bound legs and clipped his, and he responded with laughter, kneeling down to speak with a lover's whisper. "We can dance later, you and me. Tonight is Tina's turn. Sorry, sorry."

She was tied to a crate filled with sawdust, and by the smell of it, hundreds of fertile tortoise eggs.

When the service door closed, Kala tugged at the knots. How much time was left? How many hours did she have? Panic gave her a fabulous strength, but every jerk and twist only tightened the knots, and after a few minutes of work, she was exhausted, sobbing through the rope gag.

No one was going to find her.

And when they were in the new world, Tina's husband—a big strong creature with connections and a good name—would pretend to discover Kala, cutting her loose and probably telling everyone else, "Look who wanted to come with us! My wife's little friend!" And before she could say two words, he would add, "I'll feed her from our share of the stores. Yes, she's my responsibility now."

Kala gathered herself for another try at the ropes.

Then the service door opened with the same telltale squeak, and somebody began to walk slowly past her, down the aisle and back again, paus-

ing beside her for a moment before placing a knife against her wrists, yanking hard and cutting the rope clear through.

Off came her gag, then the black sack.

Sandor was holding a small flashlight in his free hand, and he touched her softly on her face, on her neck. "You all right?"

She nodded.

"Good thing I bumped into that prick out there." Her brother was trying to look grateful, but his expression and voice were tense as could be. "I asked him, 'Why aren't you with your bride?' But he didn't say anything. Which bothered me, you know." He paused, then added, "I've seen him stare at you, Kala."

"You have?"

"Haven't you?" Sandor took a deep breath, then another, gathering himself. "So I asked if he'd seen you come this way. And then he said, 'Get away from me, little boy.'"

Sandor began cutting her legs free. In the glare of his light, she saw his favorite pocket knife—the big blade made sticky and red, covered as it was with an appalling amount of blood.

"Did you kill him?" Kala muttered.

In a grim whisper, Sandor said, "Hardly."

"What happened?"

"I saved you," he answered.

"But what did you do to that man?" she demanded.

"Man?" Sandor broke into a quiet, deathly laugh. "I don't know, Kala. You're the biologist in the family. But I don't think you could call him male anymore . . . if you see what I mean. . . ."

6

In a personal ritual, Kala brought *The First Mother's Tale* out of hiding each spring and read it from cover to cover. She found pleasure in the book's adventures and heroisms, and the tragedies made her reliably sad, and even with whole tracts memorized, she always felt as if she was experiencing Claire's story for the first time. That strong, determined woman did everything possible to help her girls while making Owen behave. She made certain that every adult had a vote in every important decision—votes that were made after her counsel, naturally. Claire always spoke for the dead at funerals, and she oversaw a small feast commemorating the anniversary of their arrival. Hard famine came during their third winter. The local tortoises had been hunted to extinction while the earthly crops never prospered. It was Claire who imposed a ration system for the remaining food, and after six Wives were caught breaking into the last cache of canned goods, Claire served as judge in the bitter trial. Each girl claimed to have acted for the good of a hungry baby or babies. But there were dozens of children by then, and whose stomach wasn't growling? Twelve other girls—some Wives, some not—served as the jury. In a ritual ancient as the species, they listened to the evidence be-

fore stepping off by themselves, returning with a verdict that found each defendant guilty as charged.

The housemother had no choice but to order a full banishment.

The original Tina was one of the criminals. After some rough talk and vacuous threats, she and the other five picked up their toddlers and started south, hoping to hike their way to fresh pastures and easy food.

There was no doubt that the Six Angry Wives existed. But no consistent tale of crimes was told about them, and no Testament mentioned Claire as the presiding judge. What was known was that six women wandered through the wilderness, and when they returned ten years later, they brought blue-hens and fresh tortoise eggs as well as their four surviving children—including one lovely brown-eyed boy, nearly grown and eager to meet his father.

The truth was, no important church recognized Claire's existence, which was the same as never existing. Even the oddest offshoot faiths denied her any vital role in their history. According to *The First Mother's Tale*, the housemother lived another seven years and died peacefully in her sleep. Owen borrowed one of his Wives' Bibles to read prayers over her grave. With the relief of someone who had escaped a long burden, he thanked the woman's soul for its good work and wise guidance. And then *The First Mother's Tale* concluded with a few hopeful words from its author, the brilliant and long-dead Kala.

Except of course nothing is ever finished, and considering everything that had happened since, most of the story had barely begun.

According to most researchers, it took a full century for the pioneers to find their stride. Owen lived to be eighty—a virile man to the end—and borrowing on his godly status, he continued sleeping with an assortment of willing, fertile granddaughters. Claire's grave was soon lost to time, or she never even existed. But Owen's burial site became the world's first monument. Limestone blocks were dragged from a quarry and piled high, and the structure was decorated with a lordly statue and praising words as well as the original, still useless, ripper. Worshipers traveled for days and weeks just for a chance to kneel at the feet of the great man's likeness, and sometimes an old wound felt healed or some tireless despair would suddenly lift, proving again the powers of the First Father.

Four centuries later, enough bodies and minds were wandering the world to allow a handful to become scientists.

Inside a thousand years, humanity had spread across the warm, oxygen-impoverished globe, keeping to the lowlands, erasing the native species that fit no role. Cobbler-shops became factories, schools became universities, and slowly, the extraordinary skills necessary to build new rippers came back into the world.

In 1003, a wealthy young man purchased advertisement time on every television network. "The bigger the ripper, the better the seed," he declared to the world. And with that, he unveiled a giant Class-A ripper as well as the spacious house that would carry him and a thousand wives to a new world, plus enough frozen sperm from quality men to ensure a diverse, vital society.

He found no shortage of eager young woman.

What actually became of that colony and its people, no one could say. To leave was to vanish in every sense of the word. But thousands of rippers were built during the following centuries. Millions of pioneers left that first new world, praying for richer air and tastier foods. And after six centuries of emigration, Kala's descendants gathered around a small class-B, read passages from the Bible as well as from the Wives' Testaments, and then together they managed their small, great step into the unknown.

7

At nineteen, Kala applied with the Parks Committee, and through luck and her own persistence, she was posted to the same reserve she once visited as a youngster. She was given heavy boots and a wide-brimmed hat as well as an oversized brown uniform with a Novice tag pinned to her chest. Her first week of summer was spent giving tours to visitors curious about the native fauna and flora. But the assignment wasn't a rousing success, which was why she was soon transferred to exotic eradications—an improved posting, as it happened. Kala was free to drive the back roads in an official truck, parking at set points and walking deep into the alien forest. Hundreds of traps had to be checked every few days. Native animals were released, while the exotics were killed, usually with air-driven needles or a practiced blow to the head. At day's end, she would return to the main office and don plastic gloves, throwing the various carcasses into a cremation furnace—fat starlings and fatter house mice, mostly. If they died in the trap, the bodies would stink. But she quickly grew accustomed to the carnage. In her mind, she was doing important, frustrating work. Kala often pictured herself as a soldier standing on the front lines, alone, waging a noble struggle for which she expected almost nothing: A little money, the occasional encouragement, and, of course, the chance to return to the wilderness every morning, enjoying its doomed and fading strangeness for another long day.

One July afternoon, while Kala worked at the incinerator, another novice appeared. They had been friendly in the past. But today, for no obvious reason, the young man seemed uncomfortable. As soon as he saw Kala, his face stiffened and his gait slowed, and then, perhaps reading her puzzlement, he suddenly sped up again. "Hello," he offered with the softest possible voice.

Kala smiled while flinging a dead cat into the fire. "Did you hear?" she began. "They found a new herd of Harry's-big-days. Above Saint Mary's Glacier."

The young man hesitated for an instant. Then with a rushed voice, he sputtered, "I've got an errand. Bye now."

Long ago, Kala learned that she wasn't as sensitive to emotions as most people. Noticing something was wrong now meant there was a fair chance that it really was. Why was that boy nervous? Was she in trouble again? And if so, what had she screwed up this time?

When Kala was giving tours, there was an unfortunate incident. A big blowhard from the Grandfather Cult joined the other tourists. His per-

sonal mission was to commandeer her lecture. One moment, she was describing the false spruces and explaining how the tomb-tombs depended wholly on them. And suddenly the blowhard interrupted. With an idiot's voice, he announced that the native trees were useless as well as ugly, and all the local animals were stupid as the rocks, and their world's work wouldn't be finished until every miserable corner like this was turned into oak trees and concrete.

Kala's job demanded a certain reserve. Lecturers were not to share their opinions, unless those opinions coincided with official park policy. Usually she managed to keep her feelings in check. She endured three loud interruptions. But then the prick mentioned his fifteen sons and twelve lovely daughters, boasting that each child would end up on a different new world. Kala couldn't hold back. She was half his age and half his size, but she stepped up to him and pushed a finger into his belly, saying, "If I was your child, I'd want to leave this world too."

Most of the audience smiled, and quite a few laughed.

But the blowhard turned and marched to the front office, and by day's end, Kala was given a new job killing wildcats and other vermin.

The last carcasses were burning when her superior emerged from the station. He was an older fellow—a life-long civil servant who probably dreamed of peace and quiet until his retirement, and then a peaceful death. Approaching his temperamental novice, the man put on a painful smile, twice saying her name before adding, "I need to talk to you," with a cautious tone.

A headless starling lay on the dirt. With a boot, Kala kicked it into the incinerator and again shut the heavy iron door. Then with a brazen tone, she said, "Listen to my side first."

The man stopped short.

"I mean it," she continued. "I don't know what you've heard. I don't even know when I could have done something wrong. But I had very good reasons—"

"Kala."

"And you should hear my explanation first."

The poor old gentleman dipped his head, shaking it sadly, telling her, "Kala, sweetness. I'm sorry. All I want to say . . . to tell you . . . is that your brother called this morning. Right after you drove off." He paused long enough to breathe, and then informed her, "Your father died last night, and I'm very, very sorry."

Thrifty and impractical: Father was the same in death as in life.

That was an uncharitable assessment, but it happened to be true. Father left behind a long list of wishes, and Mother did everything he wanted, including the simple juniper box and no official funeral procession. The tombstone was equally minimal, and because cemeteries were expensive, he had mandated a private plot he had purchased as soon as he fell sick—a secret illness kept from everyone, including his wife of thirty-one years. But the burial site had drawbacks, including the absence of any road passing within a couple of hundred yards. Kala's parents hadn't been active in any church for years, which meant it was their scattered

family that was responsible for every arrangement, including digging the grave to a legal depth, finding pallbearers to help carry the graceless casket, and then, after the painful service, filling in the hole once again.

"It's a lovely piece of ground," Sandor mentioned, and not for the first time. Then he dropped a load of the dry gray earth, watching it scatter across a lid of tightly fitted red planks, big clods thumping while the tiny clods scattered, rolling and shattering down to dust, making the skittering sound of busy mice.

"It is pretty," Mother echoed, sitting on one of forty folding chairs.

Everyone else had left. Barely three dozen relatives and friends had attended the service, and probably only half of them had genuinely known the deceased. If Father died ten years ago, Kala realized, two hundred people would have been sitting and standing along this low ridge, and the church would have sent at least two ministers—one to read Scripture, while the other sat with the grieving family, giving practiced comfort. But the comfort-givers abandoned them soon after that terrible wedding night. For maiming one of the grooms, Sandor had been shunned. And once Kala and her parents didn't follow suit, the congregation used more subtle, despicable means to toss them away.

For months, Kala continued meeting old friends in secret. A little too urgently, they would tell her that nothing was her fault. But then they started asking how Kala could live with a person who had done such an awful thing. After all, Sandor had neutered one of the leading citizens of their congregation—an act of pure violence, too large and far too wicked not to be brought to the attention of the police. It didn't matter that he was protecting his only sister, which was normally a good noble principle. And it didn't matter that decent men always defended their women, or that if a girl was abducted when she was fourteen, some family member was required to send a message to those horny fools lurking out there: Hurt her, and I'll take your future generations from you!

None of that meant anything to her friends. And once Kala admitted that she felt thankful for her brother's actions, those same friends stopped inventing tricks to meet her on the sly.

Of course her brother wasn't the only person needing blame. Parents were always culpable for the sins of their children, it was said. Didn't Sandor's father and mother give him their genes and some portion of their dreams? He was technically still a child when the crime occurred, still possessed by them, and supposedly answering first to God and then to them. Wasn't that how it was supposed to be?

The kidnapping was an unfortunate business, said some. The new husband shouldn't have done what he did, and particularly with one of their own. But even in a faith that cherished monogamy, his actions were understandable. Twenty thousand years of history had built this very common outlook. One deacon—a younger man devoid of charm or common sense—visited their house after Friday service. Sitting in the meeting room with Kala's father, the deacon asked, "Where lies the difference? A young man takes two brides to a fresh world, while another lives with his first wife for twenty years, then holds a painless divorce and starts a new family with a younger woman?"

"There's an enormous difference," Father had responded, his voice rising, betraying anger Kala had rarely heard before. She was sitting in her bedroom upstairs, listening while her other great defender said, "My daughter is a young girl, first of all. And second, she had no choice in this matter. None. She was tied up like a blue-hen and abused like cargo, thrown into a situation where she would never see her family or world again. Is that fair? Or just? Or at all decent? No, and no, and no again."

"But to cut the groom like he was cut—"

"A little cut, from what I've heard."

Which was the greater surprise: Father interrupting, or insulting the penis of another man?

The deacon groaned and then said, "That vicious animal . . . your darling Sandor . . . he deserves to sit in jail for a few years."

"Let the courts decide," Father replied.

"And you realize, of course." Their guest hesitated a moment before completing his thought. "You understand that no worthy group of pioneers will let him into their ranks. Not now. Not with his taste for violence, they won't."

"I suppose not."

"Which is a shame, since your son always wanted to be a Father."

Kala heard silence, and when she imagined her father's face, she saw a look of utter shame.

Then the stupid deacon had to share one last opinion. With a black voice, he announced, "I came here for a reason, sir. I think you should appreciate what other people are saying."

"What others?"

"Women as well as the men."

"Tell me," Father demanded.

"The girl looks older than fourteen. Her body is grown, and that voice of hers could be a woman's. Any healthy man would be interested. But there's a problem in the words that Kala uses . . . and that smart, sharp tone of hers. . . ."

"What are you telling me?"

"Many of us . . . your very best friends . . . we believe that somebody should knock your daughter down a notch or two. And give her some babies to play with, too."

Father's chair squeaked—a hard defiant sound.

"Go," Kala heard him say. "Get out of my house."

"Gladly," the deacon replied. "But just so you know my sense of things, realize this: Your daughter had an opportunity that night. It might not seem fair or just to us. But if she and that brother of hers had a wit between them, she'd be living today on a better world. But as things stand, I can't imagine any reputable group will accept trouble like her. Her best bet for the future is a sloppy abduction by a single male who simply doesn't know who she is."

There was a pause—a gathering of breath and fury. Then for the only time in her life, Kala heard her father saying, "Fuck you."

That moment, and the entire nightmare . . . all of it returned to her at the gravesite. The intervening years suddenly vanished, and her lanky

body was left shaking from nerves and misery. Sandor and their mother both noticed. They watched her fling gouts of earth into the hole, and misunderstanding everything, Mom warned, "This isn't a race, sweetness."

Kala felt as if she had been caught doing something awful. She couldn't name her crime, but shame took hold. Down went the shovel, and she knelt over the partly filled grave, staring at the last two visible corners of her father's casket.

Sandor settled beside her.

With what felt like a single breath, Kalá confessed the heart of her thoughts: A single night had torn apart their lives, and despite believing she was blameless, she felt guilty. Somehow all the evil and poor luck that had followed them since was her fault. Because of her, they had lost their church and friends. Father died young, and now their mother would always be a widow. And meanwhile, her brother was a convicted criminal, stripped from what he had wanted most in life—the opportunity to become a respectable Father to some great new world.

After a difficult pause, Mom broke in. "I wouldn't have liked that at all," she maintained, "losing you without the chance to say, 'Good-bye.'"

Kala had hoped for more.

"You're being silly, sweet," would have been nice. "You aren't to blame for any of this at all," would have been perfect.

Instead, the old woman remarked, "These last years have been hard. Yes. But don't blame yourself for your father's health."

Sandor drove his shovel into the earth pile behind Kala. Then with a weighty sigh, he said, "And don't worry about me. I'm doing fine."

Hardly. Because of his stay in prison, her brother had missed his last years at school. The boy he had been was gone, replaced by a hard young man with self-made tattoos and muscles enough for two athletes.

Kala disagreed.

"You're wrong," she said with a shake of her head.

Then Sandor laughed at her, kicking a clod or two into the hole and staring down at their father, quietly reminding everyone, "Respectable" is just a word." His face was tight, his eyes were enormous, and his voice was dry and slow when he added, "And there's more than one route to reach another world."

Kala's world was settled by a confederation of small and medium-sized churches. Two million parishioners had pooled their resources, acquiring a powerful class-A ripper—a bruising monster capable of stealing away several city blocks. Each congregation selected their best pioneers, and the Last Father was elected to his lofty post, responsible for the well being of more than a thousand brave souls, plus three stowaways and at least fifteen young women kidnapped on the eve of departure. A farm field on the Asian continent was selected, in a region once known as Hunan. Where wheat and leadfruit normally grew, a huge, multi-story dome

was erected. Every pioneer plugged his ears with foam and wax. The giant ripper shook the entire structure as it searched across Creation, and, with a final surge, machine and humans were dragged along the hidden dimensions, covering the minuscule distance.

Rippers had no upper limit to their power, but there were practical considerations. Entering another world meant displacing the native air and land. With its arrival, that class-A ripper shoved aside thousands of tons of dirt and rock, erecting a ring-shaped hill of debris instantly heated by the impact. Wood and peat caught fire, and deep underground, the bedrock was compressed until it was hot enough to melt. The Last Father ordered everyone to remain indoors for the day, breathing bottled air and watching the fires spread and die under an evening thunderstorm. Then the survey teams were dispatched, racing over the blackened ground, finding pastures of black sedge-like grass where they caught the native mice and pseudoinsects as well as a loose-limbed creature with a glancing resemblance to the lost monkeys in the oldest textbooks.

Experience promised this: If intelligence evolved on a new world, chances are it would live in Asia. Competition was stiffest on large landmasses. That's how it had been on the original earth. Australia was once home to opossums and kangaroos, and dimension-crossing pioneers might have been tempted to linger there, unaware that lying over the horizon were continents full of smart, aggressive placental creatures, including one fierce medium-sized ape with some exceptionally mighty plans.

But the vermin brought home by the survey teams had simple smooth brains, while the monkey-creature proved to be an intellectual midget next to any respectable cat. The Last Father met with his advisors and then with his loving wife, and following a suitable period of contemplation and prayer, he announced that this was where God wished them to remain for the rest of their days.

The new colony expanded swiftly, in numbers and reach.

The Last Father died with honor, six of his nine children carrying his body into a granite cathedral built at the site of their arrival.

By then villages and little cities were scattered across a thousand miles of wilderness. Within ten generations, coal-fired ships were mapping coastlines on every side of the Mother Ocean, while little parties were moving inland, skirting the edges of the Tibetan Plateau on their way to places once called Persia and Turkey, Lebanon and France.

The original churches grew and split apart, or they shriveled and died.

And always, new faiths were emerging, often born from a single believer's ideals and his very public fantasies.

The original class-A ripper served as an altar inside the Last Father's cathedral. A cadre of engineers maintained its workings, while a thousand elite soldiers stood guard over the holy ground. The symbols were blatant and unflinching: First and always, this world would serve as a launching point to countless new realms. Human duty was to build more rippers—a promise finally fulfilled several centuries ago. By Kala's time, the thousand original pioneers had become five billion citizens. Tax codes and social conventions assured that rippers would always be built. Experts guessed that perhaps fifteen billion bodies could live on these warm

lands, and with luck and God's blessing, that would be the day when enough rippers were rolling out of enough factories to allow every excess child to escape, every boy free to find his own empty, golden realm, and every girl serving as a good man's happy Wife.

Sandor hated that his sister traveled alone. Every trip Kala took was preceded by a difficult conversation, on the phone or in person. It was his duty to remind her that the open highway was an exceptionally dangerous place. Sandor always had some tale to share about some unfortunate young woman who did everything right—drove only by day, spoke to the fewest possible strangers, and slept in secure hotels that catered to their kind. Yet without exception, each of those smart ladies had vanished somewhere on the road, usually without explanation.

"But look at the actual numbers," Kala liked to counter. "The chance of me being abducted twice in my life—"

"Is tiny. I know."

"Dying in a traffic accident is ten times more likely," she would add.

But eventually Sandor analyzed the same statistics, ambushing her with a much bleaker picture. "Dying in a wreck is three times as likely," he informed Kala. "But that's for all women. Old and young. Those in your subset—women in their twenties, with good looks and driving alone—are five times as likely to disappear as they are to die in a simple, run-of-the-mill accident."

"But I have to travel," she countered. Her doctorate involved studying the native communities scattered across a dozen far flung mountaintops. Driving was mandatory, and since there was barely enough funding as it was, she had no extra money to hire reliable security guards. "I know you don't appreciate my work—"

"I never said that, Kala."

"Because you're such a painfully polite fellow." Then laughing at her own joke, she reminded him, "I always carry a registered weapon."

"Good."

"And a gun that isn't registered."

"As you damn well should," Sandor insisted.

"Plus there's a thousand little things I do, or two million things I avoid." She always had one or two new tricks to offer, just to prove that she was outracing her unseen enemies. "And if you have any other suggestions, please . . . share them with your helpless little sister. . . ."

"Don't tease," he warned. "You don't understand what men want from women. If you did, you'd never leave home."

Kala had a tidy little apartment on a women's floor, set ten stories above the street—far too high to be stolen away with all but the biggest ripper. On this occasion, Sandor happened to be passing through, supposedly chasing a mechanic's job but not acting in any great hurry to leave. His main mission, as far as she could tell, was to terrify his little sister.

As always, he came armed with news clippings and Web sites. He wanted her to appreciate the fact that her mountains were full of horny males, each one more dangerous than the others, and all the bastards fighting for their chance to start some new world. As it happened, last week a large shipment of class-C rippers had just been hijacked from an armed convoy, and now the Children of Forever were proclaiming a time of plenty. And just yesterday, outside New Eternal, some idiot drove a big freight truck through two sets of iron gates before pulling up beside the classroom wing of a ladies' academy. Moments later, a large class-B ripper fired off, leaving behind a hemispherical hole and a mangled building, as well as a thousand scared teenage girls, saved only because they had been called into the auditorium for a hygiene lecture from the school's doctor.

Kala shrugged at the bad news. "Crap is a universal constant. Nothing has changed, and I'm going to be fine."

But really, she never felt good about driving long distances, and the recent news wasn't comforting. Nearly a hundred stolen rippers were somewhere on the continent, which had to shift the odds that trouble would find her. Kala let herself feel the fear, and then with a burst of nervous creativity, she blurted out a possible solution.

"Come with me," she said.

Sandor was momentarily stunned.

"If you're that especially worried about me, ride along and help me with my work. Unless you really do have some plush mechanic's job waiting."

"All right then," he answered. "I'd like that."

"A long family vacation," she said with a grin.

And he completed her thought, adding, "Just like we used to do."

More than ten years had passed since they last spent time together, and the summer-long journey gave them endless chances to catch up. But for all the days spent on the road, not to mention the weeks hiking and working on alpine trails, they shared remarkably little. Kala heard nothing about life in prison and very little about how Sandor had made his living since his release. And by the same token, she never felt the need to mention past boys and future men—romantic details that she always shared with her closest friends. For a time, the silences bothered her. But then she decided siblings always had difficulty with intimacy. Sharing genetics and a family was such a deep, profound business that no one felt obliged to prove their closeness by ordinary routes. Sandor revealed himself only in glimpses—a few words or a simple gesture—while in her own fashion, Kala must have seemed just as close-mouthed. But of course these secrets of theirs didn't matter. This man would always be her brother, and that was far larger than any other relationship they might cobble together while driving across the spine of a continent.

Sandor relished his job as protector. At every stop, he was alert and a little aggressive, every stranger's face deserving a quick study, and some of them requiring a hard warning stare. She appreciated the sense of menace that seemed to rise out of him at will. In ways she hadn't anticipated, Kala enjoyed watching Sandor step up to a counter, making innocent clerks flinch. His tattoos flexed and his face grew hard as stone, and

she liked the rough snarl in his voice when he said, "Thank you." Or when he snapped at some unknown fellow, "Out of our way. Please. Sir."

If anything, empty wilderness was worse than the open road. It made him more suspicious, if not out-and-out paranoid.

Kala's work involved an obscure genus of pseudoinsects. She was trying to find and catalog unknown species before they vanished, collecting data about their habitat and specimens that she froze and dried and stuck into long test tubes. One July evening, on the flank of a giant southern volcano, she heard a peculiar sound from behind a grove of spruce trees. A rough hooting, it sounded like. "I wonder what that was," she mentioned. Sandor instantly slipped away from the fire, walking the perimeter at least twice before returning again, one hand holding a long flashlight and the other carrying an even longer pistol equipped with a nightscope. "So what was it?" she asked.

"Boys," he reported. "They were thinking of camping near us."

"They were?"

"Yeah," he said, sitting next to the fire again. "But I guess for some reason they decided to pull up their tent and move off. Who knows why?"

Moments like that truly pleased Kala.

But following her pleasure was a squeamish distaste. What kind of person was she? She thought of herself as being independent and self-reliant, but on the other hand, she seemed to relish being watched over by a powerful and necessarily dangerous man.

Two days later, driving north, Sandor mentioned that he had never gotten his chance to visit the Grand Canyon. "Our vacation never made it," he reminded her. "And I haven't found the time since."

Kala let them invest one full day of sightseeing.

The canyon's precise location and appearance varied on each world. But there was always a river draining that portion of the continent, and the land had always risen up in response to the predictable tectonics. Since their earth was wetter than most, the river was big and angry, cutting through a billion years of history on its way to the canyon floor. Kala paid for a cable-car ride to the bottom. They ate hard-boiled blue-hen eggs and mulberries for lunch, and afterwards, walking on the rocky shoreline, she pointed to the rotting carcass of a Helen-trout. The First Father didn't bring living fish with him, but later Fathers realized that fish farming meant cheap protein. The Helen-trout came from the fifth new world—in-discriminate feeders that could thrive in open ocean or fresh water, and that adored every temperature from freezing to bathwater. No major drainage in the world lacked the vermin. "They die when they're pregnant," she explained. "Their larvae use the mother as food, eating her as she rots, getting a jump on things before they swim away."

Sandor seemed to be listening. But then again, he always seemed to pay attention to his surroundings. In this case, he gave a little nod, and after a long pause said, "I'm curious, Kala. What do you want to accomplish? With your work, I mean."

He asked that question every few days, as if for the first time.

At first Kala thought that he simply wasn't hearing her answers. Later, she wondered if he was trying to break her down, hoping to make her ad-

mit that she didn't have any good reason for her life's investment. But after weeks of enduring this verbal dance, she began to appreciate what was happening. To keep from boring herself, she was forced to change her response. Inside the canyon, staring at the dead fish, she didn't bother with old words about the duty and honor that came from saving a few nameless bugs. And she avoided the subject of great medicines that probably would never emerge from her work. Instead, staring down at the rich bulging body, she offered a new response.

"This world of ours is dying, Sandor."

The statement earned a hard look and an impossible-to-read grin. "Why's that?" he asked over the roar of the water.

"A healthy earth has ten or twenty or fifty million species. Depending on how you count them." She shook her head, reminding him, "The Last Father brought as many species as possible. Nearly a thousand multicellular species have survived here. And that's too few to make an enduring, robust ecosystem."

Sandor shrugged and gestured at the distant sky. "Things look good enough," he said. "What do you mean it's dying?"

"Computer models point to the possibility," she explained. "Low diversity means fragile ecosystems. And it's more than just having too few species. It's the nature of these species. Wherever we go, we bring weed species. Biological thugs, essentially. And not just from the original earth but from seventeen distinct evolutionary histories. Seventeen lines that are nearly alien to one another. That reduces meaningful interactions. It's another factor why there will eventually come a crunch."

"Okay. So when?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Next year?"

"Not for thousands of years," she allowed. "But there is a collapse point, and after that, the basic foundations of this biosphere will decline rapidly. Phytoplankton, for one. The native species are having troubles enduring the new food chains, and if they end up vanishing, then nobody will be making free oxygen."

"Trees don't make oxygen?"

"They do," she admitted. "But their wood burns or rots. And rotting is the same reaction as burning, chemically speaking."

Sandor stared at the gray mother fish.

"You know how it is when you turn on a ripper?" Kala asked. "You know how the machine has to search hard for a world with a livable atmosphere?"

Her brother nodded, a look of anticipation building in the pale brown eyes.

"Do you ever wonder why so many earths don't have decent air for us? Do you?" Kala gave him a rough pat on the shoulder, asking, "What if a lot of pioneers have been moving across the multiverse? Humans and things that aren't human, too. And what if most of these intrepid pioneers eventually kick their worlds out of equilibrium, killing them as a consequence?"

"Yeah," he said.

Then after a long thoughtful moment: "Huh."

And that was the last time Sandor ever bothered to doubt the importance of Kala's work.

The heart of every ripper was a cap-shaped receptacle woven from diamond whiskers, each whisker doctored with certain rare-earth elements and infused with enough power to pierce the local brane. But as difficult as the receptacle was to build, it was a simple chore next to engineering the machines to support and control its work. Hard drives and the capacitors had to function on the brink of theoretical limits. Heat and quantum fluctuations needed to be kept at a minimum. The best rippers utilized a cocktail of unusual isotopes, doubling their reliability as well as tripling the costs, while security costs added another 40 percent to the final price.

Twice that summer, Kala and her brother saw convoys of finished rippers being shipped across country. Armored trucks were painted a lush emerald green, each one accompanied by two or three faster vehicles bristling with weapons held by tough young men. Routes and schedules were supposed to be kept secret. Since even a small ripper was worth a fortune, the corporations did whatever they could to protect their investments. Which made Kala wonder: How do the Children of Forever learn where one convoy would be passing, and what kind of firepower would it take to make the rippers their own?

Sandor was driving when they ran into one of the convoys. A swift little blister of armor and angry faces suddenly passed them on the wrong side. "Over," screamed every face. "Pull over."

They were beside the Mormon Sea, on a highway famous for scenery and its narrow, almost nonexistent, shoulders. But Sandor complied, fitting them onto a slip of asphalt and turning off the engine, then setting the parking brake and turning to look back around the bend, eyes huge and his lower lip tucked into his mouth.

For a moment or two, Kala watched the bright water of the inland sea, enjoying the glitter stretching to the horizon. Then came the rumble of big engines, and a pair of heavy freight trucks rolled past, followed by more deadly cars, and then another pair of trucks.

"Class-Cs," Sandor decided. "About a hundred of them, built down in Highborn."

The trucks had no obvious markings. "How can you tell?"

"The lack of security," he said. "Cs don't get as much. It's the As and Bs that bandits can sell for a fortune. And I know the company because each truck's got a code on its side, if you know how to read it."

The convoy had passed out of sight, but they remained parked beside the narrow road. "When are we moving again?" she asked.

"Wait," he cautioned.

She shifted in her seat and took a couple of meaningful breaths.

Reading the signs, Sandor turned to her. "You don't want to trail them too closely. Someone might get the wrong idea. Know what I mean?"

And with that, her brave, almost fearless brother continued to sit beside the road, hands squeezing the wheel.

"You gave somebody the wrong idea," she said.

"Pardon?"

"Sandor," she said. "In your life, how many convoys have you followed?"

Nothing changed about his face. Then suddenly, a little smile turned up the corner of his mouth, and with a quiet, conspiratorial voice, he admitted, "Fifty, maybe sixty."

She wasn't surprised, except that she didn't expect to feel so upset. "Is that how badly you want it? To be a Father . . . you're willing to steal a ripper just to get your chance. . . ?"

He started to nod. Then again, he looked at his sister, reminding her, "I'm still here. So I guess I'm not really that eager."

"What went wrong? The work was too dangerous for you?"

His expression looked injured now. Straightening his back, he started the car and pulled out, accelerating for a long minute, letting the silence work on Kala until he finally told her, "You know, there were thirty-two security men on that other convoy. The one hit by the Children of Forever. Plus a dozen drivers and three corporate representatives. And all were killed during the robbery."

"I know that—"

"Most of those poor shits were laid down in a ditch by the road and shot through the head. Just so motorists wouldn't notice the bodies when they drove past." He squeezed the steering wheel until it squeaked, and very carefully, he told Kala, "That's when I gave up wanting it. Being a Father to the very best world isn't enough reason to murder even one poor boy who's trying to make some money and keep his family fed."

A pair of mountain ranges stood as islands far out in the Mormon Sea, and they spent a few days walking the tallest peaks. Then they drove north again, up to the Geysers, enjoying a long hike through the mountains north of that volcanic country. Then it was late August, and they started back toward Kala's home. One stop remained, kept until now for sentimental reasons.

"Our best vacation," she muttered.

Sandor agreed with his silence and a little wink.

They stayed in a reserve campground meant for employees, and Kala introduced her brother to the few rangers that remained from her days here. The mood was upbeat, on the whole. Old colleagues expressed interest in her studies, asking knowledgeable questions, and in some cases, offering advice.

One older gentleman—a fellow who had never warmed much to her before—nodded as he listened to her description of her work. Then he said, "Kala," with a sweet, almost fatherly voice. "I know a place with just that kind of bug. I can't tell you the species, but I don't think it's quite what you've found before."

"Really? Where?"

He brought out a map and pointed at a long valley on the other side of the continental divide. "It looks too low in altitude, I suppose. And a lot of junipers are moving in. But if you get up by this looping road here—"

Sandor pushed in close to watch.

"There's a little glen. I've seen that blue bug there, I'm sure."

"Thank you," Kala told him.

"Whatever I can do to help," the old ranger said. Then he made a show of rolling up the map, asking, "I can take you up myself. If your brother wants to stay here and rest for a bit."

Sandor said, "No thanks."

But he said it in an especially nice way. For the time being, neither one of them could see what was happening.

11

As promised, juniper trees were standing among the natives. Rilly birds and starlings must have eaten juniper berries outside the reserve. Since their corrosive stomach acids were essential for the germination process, wherever they relieved themselves, a new forest of ugly gray-green trees sprouted, prickly and relentless. Most biologists claimed that it was an innate, mutualistic relationship between species. But Kala had a different interpretation: The birds knew precisely what they were doing. Whenever a starling took a dump, it sang to the world, "I'm planting a forest here. And I'm going to be the death of you, you silly old trees."

Sandor squatted and stuck his thick fingers into the needle litter, churning up a long pink worm. After a summer spent watching Kala, he was now one of the great experts when it came to a single genus of pseudoinsects. "Not all that promising," he announced.

Earthworms were another key invader from their home world. And no, nightcrawlers didn't usually coexist with her particular creepy-crawlies.

"Maybe higher up," he offered.

But the old ranger told her this was the place, which implied that her subjects were enduring despite worms and trees: A heroic image that Kala wanted to cling to for a little while longer.

"You wander," she said. "If I don't find anything, I'll follow."

Sandor winked and stepped back into the black shadows.

Twenty minutes later, Kala gave up the hunt. Stepping into a little clearing, she sat on a rock bench, pulling a sandwich from her knapsack and managing a bite before a stranger stepped off the trail behind her.

"Excuse me?"

Startled, Kala wheeled fast, her free hand reaching for the pistol on her belt. But the voice was a girl's, and she was a very tiny creature—big-eyed and fragile, maybe ten years younger than Kala. The girl looked tired and worried. Her shirt was torn, and her left arm wore a long scrape that looked miserably sore.

"Can you help me, ma'am? Please?"

Carefully, Kala rose to her feet while pushing the sandwich back inside her bag, using that same motion to make certain that her second pistol was where she expected it to be. Then with a careful voice, she asked, "Are you lost, sweetie?"

"That too," the girl said, glancing over her shoulder before stepping away from the forest's edge. "It's been days since I've been outside. At least."

Kala absorbed the news. Then she quietly asked, "Where have you been?"

"In the back end."

"The end of what?"

"The bus," the girl snapped, as if Kala should already know that much.

"He put me with the others, in the dark—"

"Other girls?"

"Yes, yes." The little creature drifted forward, tucking both hands into her armpits. "He's a mean one—"

"What sect?"

"Huh?"

"Does he belong to a sect?"

"The Children of Forever," the strange girl confessed. "Do you know about them?"

With her right hand, Kala pulled the pistol from her belt while keeping the bag on her left shoulder. Nothing moved in the trees. Except for the girl and her, there might be no one else in this world.

"He's collecting wives," the girl related. "He told me he wants ten of us before he leaves."

"Come closer," Kala told her. Then she asked, "How many girls does he have so far?"

The girl swallowed. "Three."

"And there's just him?"

"Yeah. He's alone." The girl's eyes were growing larger, unblinking and bright. "Three other girls, and me. And him."

"Where?"

"Down that way," said the girl. "Past the parking lot, hiding up in some big old grease trees."

Kala's car lay in the same direction. But Sandor had gone the opposite direction.

Whispering, she told the stranger, "Okay. I can help you."

"Thank you, ma'am!"

"Quiet."

"Sorry," the girl muttered.

"Now," Kala told her. "This way."

The girl fell in beside her, rubbing her bloodied arm as she walked. She breathed hard and fast. Several more times, she said, "Thank you." But she didn't seem to look back half as often as Kala did, and maybe that was what seemed wrong.

After a few minutes of hard walking, Kala asked, "So how did you get free?"

The girl looked back then. And with a nod, she said, "I crawled up through the vent."

A tiny creature like that: Kala could believe it.

"I cut my arm on a metal edge."

The wound was red, but the blood had clotted some time ago. Even as Kala nodded, accepting that story, a little part of her was feeling skeptical.

"If he finds me, he'll hurt me."

"I won't let him hurt you," Kala promised.

"There's three other girls in the bus," she repeated. Then she put her

hands back into her armpits, hugging herself hard, saying, "We should save them, if we can. Sneak up to the bus while he's hunting for me and get them free, maybe."

But Kala wanted to find Sandor. She came close to mentioning him to the girl, but then she thought better of it. Her brother's presence was a secret that made her feel better. It gave her the confidence to tell the girl, "Later. First I have to make sure that you're safe."

The girl stared up at her protector, saying nothing.

"Come on," Kala urged.

"I want to be safe," the girl said.

"That's what I'm doing—"

"No," she said. Then her hands came out from under her arms, one of them empty while the other held a little box with two metal forks sticking from one end, and the forks jumped out and dove into her skin, and suddenly a hot blue bolt of lightning was rolling through her body.

The girl disarmed Kala and stole her bag and tied her up with plastic straps pulled from her back pocket. Then she vanished down the path. The pain subsided enough to where Kala could sit up, watching uphill, imagining her brother's arrival. But this wasn't the path he had taken, and he still hadn't shown by the time the girl and a New Father appeared. A stubby automatic weapon hung on his shoulder. He was forty or forty-five years old, a big, strong, and homely creature with rough hands and foul breath. "She is awfully pretty," was his first assessment, smiling at his latest acquisition. Then he offered a wink, adding, "He promised I'd like you. And he was right."

The old ranger had set this up.

"I didn't see any brother," said the tiny girl.

"That would be too easy," the man cautioned. Then he handed his weapon to the girl and grabbed Kala, flinging her over a shoulder while saying, "I don't think he'll be any problem. But come on anyway, sweet. Fast as we can walk."

They entered the open glade, crossing the parking lot and passing Kala's tiny car before they climbed again, entering a mature stand of native trees. Hiding in the gloom was a long bus flanked by a pair of fat freight trucks, each vehicle equipped with wide tires and extra suspension. And there were many more brides than three, Kala saw. Twelve was her first count, fourteen when she tried again. Each girl was in her teens. They looked like schoolgirls on a field trip, giggling and teasing the newest wife by saying, "Too old to walk for herself," and, "Fresh blood in the gene pool, looks like."

Three young men silently watched Kala's arrival. Sons, by the looks of them. In their early twenties, at most.

"Beautiful," said one of the boys.

The other two nodded and grinned.

With the care shown to treasured luggage, the older man set Kala beneath a tree, her back propped against the black trunk, arms and legs needing to be retied, just to make sure. Kala quickly looked from face to face, hoping for any sign of empathy. There was none. And the girl who

had been sent out as bait stood over Kala for several minutes, wearing the hardest expression of all.

"He will come for me," Kala said.

"Your brother probably will," said the New Father. "But I've been watching you two. He's carrying nothing bigger than that long pistol, and we've got artillery here he wouldn't dare face."

As if to prove their murderous natures, the sons retrieved their own automatic weapons from the bus.

"What next?" one son asked.

"Stay here with me," their father advised.

But the oldest son didn't like that tactic. "We could circle around, pick him off when he shows himself."

"No," he was told.

"But—"

"What did I say?"

The young man dropped his face.

"God led us to this place," the wiser man continued. "And God has seen to give us a sticky hot day. Pray for storms. That's my advice. Then we can punch a hole in the clouds and get power enough to finally leave. . . ."

Lightning, he was talking about. Kala had heard about this technique: With a proper rocket and enough wire following like a tail, it was possible to create lightning during a thunderstorm. A channel of air supplied the connection to the charged earth below. The bolt would strike a preset lightning rod . . . up in the tree on the other side of camp, she realized. She noticed the tall black spike and the heavy wires leading down into the ripper that was probably set in the center of the bus, a class-C that was hungry and waiting for its first and only meal.

Kala could guess why these people had come into the mountains. They liked solitude and cheap energy, and besides, the police were hunting everywhere else for those who had murdered the security guards.

Sandor was somewhere close, Kala told herself.

Watching her.

She almost relaxed, imagining her brother hunkered low in the shadow of some great old tree, waiting for a critical mistake to be made. Hunting for an opening, a weakness. Any opportunity. She went as far as picturing his arrival: Sandor would wait for afternoon and the gathering storms, and maybe the rain would start to fall, fat drops turning into a deluge, and while the devout boys and girls watched for the Lord in that angry sky, her brother would sneak up behind her and neatly cut her free. Obviously, that's what would happen.

Kala thought so highly of the plan that she was as surprised as anyone when a figure emerged from the shadows—a man smaller than most were, running on bare feet to keep his noise to a minimum. He was quick, but something in his stride seemed unhurried. Untroubled. He looked something like a hiker who had lost his way but now had found help. Perhaps that was what Sandor intended. But his face was grim and focused, and no motion was wasted. Everybody—grooms and brides and even their captive—stared for a moment, examining the stranger in their midst. Then the newcomer reached beneath his shirt and lifted a long pis-

tol, and the first hollow point removed the top of the father's head and the second one knocked the small girl flat. Then Sandor was running again, slipping between brides, and one of the sons finally lifted his weapon, spraying automatic gunfire until three girls had dropped and another brother had pushed the barrel into the forest floor, screaming, "Stop, would you . . . just stop. . . !"

Sandor had the third brother by the neck, slamming him against the broad black trunk of a tree. Then he stared out at the cowering survivors, pressing the barrel of the pistol into the man's ass, and with a voice eerily composed, he said, "Put your guns down. Do it now. Or I'm going to do some painting over here . . . with a goddamn pubic hair brush. . . ."

12

The matronly gray robes of middle age had vanished, replaced by an old woman's love for gaudy colors. She was wearing a rich slick and very purple dress with a purple hat with a wide gold belt and matching shoes. Diet and exercise had removed enough weight to give her a stocky, solid figure. She nicely filled the station of her life—that of the fit, well-rested widow. Seeing her children standing at her doorway, Mom smiled—a thoroughly genuine expression, happy but brief. Then she found something alarming in their faces. "What's happened?" With concern, she said, "Darlings. What's wrong?"

Kala glanced at her brother and then over her shoulder.

In the street sat a plain commercial van. Nothing about the vehicle was remarkable, except that its back end was being pressed down by the terrific, relentless weight of a class-C ripper and a powerful little winch.

The van was their fourth vehicle in three days, and Sandor would replace it tomorrow, if he thought it would help.

"I was just leaving," their mother offered. And when no one else spoke, she added, "I don't normally dress like this—"

"Don't go," said her son.

"Are you meeting friends?" Kala asked. "If you don't show, will somebody miss you?"

Mom shook her head. "I just go to the tea parlor on Fridays. I know people, but no, I doubt if anybody expects me."

It was the Sabbath today, wasn't it?

"Can I park the van inside your garage?" Sandor asked.

Mom nodded. "You'll have to pull my car out—"

"Keys," he said.

She fished them from a purse covered with mock jewelry, and Sandor started down the front stairs.

Kala gratefully stepped inside. All these years, and the same furnishings and carpet populated the living room, although every surface was a little more worn now. Immersed in what was astonishingly familiar, she suddenly relaxed. She couldn't help herself. All at once it was impossible to stand under her own power, and as soon as she sat, a deep need for sleep began to engulf her.

"What's happened?" Mom repeated. "What's wrong?"

"We're going to explain everything, Mom."

"You look awful, sweetness. Both of you do." The old woman sat beside Kala on the lumpy couch, one hand patting her on the knee. "But I'm glad to see you two, together."

Sometime in these last few moments, Kala had begun to cry.

"Tell me, dear."

In what felt like a single breath, the story emerged. For the second time in her life, Kala had been kidnapped, but this time Sandor killed two people while freeing her. A second bride died in random gunfire, and two more were severely injured. "But we had to leave them," Kala confessed. "After we disarmed the brothers and brides, we left them with first aid kits and two working trucks . . . except Sandor shot out the tires before we drove off in their bus, just to make sure we would have a head start. . . ."

Her mother held herself motionless, mouth open and no sound worth the effort.

"It was a big long bus with a ripper onboard. Sandor drove us through the mountains. Fast. I don't know why we didn't crash, but we didn't. We stopped at a fix-it shop and he made calls, and a hundred miles after that, we met a couple friends of his . . . men that he met inside prison, I think. . . ."

"When was this?"

"Wednesday," she answered. "Those friends helped Sandor pull the ripper from the bus. They gave us a new truck and kept the capacitors and the other expensive gear for themselves. Then he and I drove maybe two miles, and that's when Sandor stole a second truck. Because he didn't quite trust his friends, and what if they decided to come take the ripper too?" She wiped at her eyes, her cheeks. "After that, we drove more than a thousand miles, but never in a straight line. By then, we'd finally decided what we were going to do, and he stole the van before we came here."

Mom was alert, focused. She was sitting forward with her hand clenched to her daughter's knee. Very quietly, she asked, "Is it one of the stolen rippers? From that convoy?"

Kala nodded. "The ID marks match."

"Have you thought about giving it back to its rightful owners?"

"We talked about that. Yes."

But then Mom saw what had eventually become obvious to Kala. "Regardless of what you tell the owners, they'll think your brother had something to do with the robbery and murders. And what good would that do?"

"Nothing."

Then her mother gathered up Kala's hands, and without hesitation, she said, "God has given you a gift, darling."

She didn't think about it in religious terms. But the words sounded nice.

"A great rare and wonderful gift," her mother continued. "And you know, if there is one person who truly deserves to inherit a new world, it has to be—"

"My brother?"

"No," Mom exclaimed, genuinely surprised. Then as the front door swung open and Sandor stepped inside, she said brightly, "It's you, sweetness. You deserve the best world. Of course, of course, of course. . . .!"

* * *

Their frantic days had only just begun. The Children of Forever would have learned their names from the old ranger, or maybe from Kala's abandoned car. And people who had murdered dozens to steal the ripper would undoubtedly do anything to recover what was theirs and avenge their losses. Obviously, it was best to vanish again, this time taking their mother with them. Old lives and treasured patterns had to be avoided, yet even on the run, they still had to find time and energy to make plans for what was to come next.

Sandor knew the best places to find machinery and foodstuffs and the other essential supplies. But Kala knew where to find people—the right people—who would make this business worthwhile. And it was their mother who acted as peacemaker, calming the waters when her two strong-willed children began fighting over the details that always looked trivial the next day.

Suddenly it was winter—the worst season to migrate to another world. But that gave them the gift of several months where they could make everything perfect, or nearly so.

Years ago, the old fix-it man who once worked on their family car had retired, and the next owner had driven his shop out of business. The property was purchased from the bank for nothing and reconnected to the power grid, and with Kala's friends supplying labor and enough money, Sandor managed to refit the building according to their specific needs. Medical stocks were locked in the lady's room. The garage was jammed with canned and dried food and giant water tanks, plus the rest of their essential goods, including a fully charged class-C ripper that would carry away the little building.

On a cold bleak day in late March—several weeks before their scheduled departure—a stranger came looking for gasoline. He parked beside one of the useless pumps and pulled on his horn several times. Then he climbed out of the small, nondescript car, and, ignoring the CLOSED signs painted on the shuttered windows, walked across the cracked pavement in order to knock hard on both garage doors and the front door.

"Hey! Anybody there?" he shouted before finally giving up.

As he returned to his car, Kala asked her brother, "What is he? Children of Forever, or some kind of undercover cop?"

"Really," Sandor replied, "does it matter?"

Kala set her splattergun back in its cradle.

"I think it's time," their mother offered.

It was too early in the season to be ideal. But what choice did they have? Kala lifted the phone and made one coded call to the nearest town. And within the hour, everybody had arrived. Those who weren't going with them offered quick tearful good-byes to those who were, showering those blessed pioneers with kisses and love. But then the pioneers had enough, and with quick embarrassed voices, they said, "Enough, Mommy. Daddy. That's enough. Good-bye!"

Kala had come too far and paid too much of a price not to watch what was about to happen. She opened all of the shutters in the public room,

letting the murky gray flow inside, and then she sat between two six-year-olds, one of whom asked, "How much longer now?"

"Soon," she promised. "A minute or two, at most."

Sandor and several other mechanically minded souls were in the garage, watching the ripper power up. Sharing the public room with Kala were a handful of grown men and a dozen women, plus nearly forty children sitting on tiny folding chairs, the oldest child being a stubborn twelve-year-old boy—the only son of colleagues who were staying behind.

Kala's mother was one of the women, and she wasn't even the oldest.

"We're not making everybody else's mistakes," Kala had explained to her, sitting in the old living room some months ago. "We're taking grandparents and little kids, but very few young adults. I don't want virility and stupidity. I want wisdom and youth."

"What seeds are you taking?" her mother had asked.

"None."

"Did I hear you say—?"

"No seeds, and no animals. Not even one viable tortoise shell. And before we leave, I want to make sure every mouse in the building is dead, and every fly and flea, and if there's one earthworm living under us, I'll kill it myself when it pops up in the new world."

Nobody was leaving this world but humans.

And even then, they were traveling as close to empty-handed as they dared. They had tools and a few books about science and mechanics. But everyone had taken an oath not to bring any Bibles or odd Testaments, and, as far as possible, everything else that smacked of preconceptions and fussy religion had to be left behind on their doomed world.

The children came from families who believed as Kala believed.

It was amazing, and heartening, how many people held opinions not too much unlike hers. And sometimes in her most doubting moments, she found herself wondering if maybe her home world had a real chance of surviving the next ten thousand years.

But there were many parents who saw doom coming—ecological or political or religious catastrophes—and that's why they were so eager to give up a young son or daughter.

They were there now, standing out near the highway, surely hearing the ripper as it began to hammer hard at reality.

From inside the cold garage, Sandor shouted, "A target's acquired!"

Will this madness work? Kala asked herself one last time. Could one species arrive on an alien world, with children and old people in tow, and find food enough to survive? And then could they pass through the next ten thousand years without destroying everything that that world was and could have become. . . ?

And then it was too late to ask the question.

The clouds of one day had vanished into a suddenly blue glare of empty skies, a green-blue lawn of grassy something stretching off into infinity . . . and suddenly a room full of bright young voices shouted, "Neat! Sweet! Pretty!"

Then the boy on her right tugged at her arm, adding, "That's fun, Miss Kala. Let's do it again!" ○

Kit Reed's new novel, *The Baby Merchant*, is just out from Tor Books. Another novel, *Thinner Than Thou*, which won the American Library Association Alex Award, and her collection, *Dogs of Truth*, are both available in trade paperback. In addition, her book, *Bronze: A Tale of Terror*, which garnered a starred review in *Publishers Weekly*, is just out from Nightshade Books, and her tale of the "Family Bed" was a best short story nominee for last year's International Horror Guild award. Kit's taste for terror is apparent in her latest story for *Asimov's*—a near future look at the search for . . .

BIODAD

Kit Reed

Suzie

Freddy and me, we are so excited!

In spite of all Mom's talk about how science made us twins out of a lot of love plus a test tube, it turns out we have a father!

He's out there walking around somewhere in the world, a living breathing person instead of so much junk in a syringe or something, which is what we thought.

Mom showed us his picture on the web.

So it wasn't just science, like she told us in fourth grade when she explained The Facts of Life. Imagine that! There was a real live guy involved. A living, breathing 3-D person, who looks a lot like us. She never met him before she had us, they certainly didn't bump surfaces. But here we are. It was Mom and whatever was in the jar. A doctor did the rest.

They made her sign a paper swearing never to contact the person, but her last boyfriend warned us about that. "Don't count on Nina to keep her word," Cecil said the night he moved out. "It's like putting your money on a dead horse." He said she has impulse control problems, which is why they broke up.

He said she was stepping out on him in some kind of chat room, when

she'd promised to be faithful to the end. But Cecil, we only got a year's worth of Cecil whereas Mom is forever, so what does he know?

She's been holed up in the bedroom for weeks, tapping and mousing like a lunatic. She quit going to the office, which is OK because she's some kind of vice president and they let her. She e-mails on her Blackberry and decides stuff for them in her jammies. Except for meals and the wash and all, she doesn't come out. She's been in there ever since Cecil left.

Well, that's fine with us. Me and Freddy scrape our veggies into the Dispos-al the minute she picks up her tray and goes. We stay up as late as we want, eating Ring Dings in front of the TV. Well, we did until last night.

Now we are packing. Wow.

We were watching *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* when she came out of the bedroom all excited and different. Her hair was washed. She had on a new dress. "Susie, Freddy, I have something to tell you."

"Not now, Mom, it's almost the end!"

"Now." She dragged us in to look at Friendster, of all things. She had this guy bookmarked, so his picture came up right away. "Look, kids. Isn't he gorgeous?"

Freddy said, "I suppose so. For a guy."

"Look like anyone you know?"

I squinted at his profile. Favorite music. Likes. Dislikes. I said, "Who is he?"

Oh, she looked proud. Like a cat that will never run out of canaries. "Stanley Q. Tash. Recently divorced."

"Not another internet boyfriend, Mom. Cecil was nice, but I think he used to eat soap."

"No, sweetie." Her face was pink and she was shaking all over. Her voice was too. "This is completely different." She moused over the photo and it changed. "Look, Suzie, see him in profile. What do you see?"

"A guy."

Mom loves us, but OK, she is kind of a romantic. She keeps going back to her high school yearbook to read all the love stuff her old boyfriends wrote. She says she had her day, we're all the family she needs, but we know she's looking for the right guy. "A very special guy."

She turned Freddy's head so it matched up with the one on the screen. "OK, Suzie. Now do you see what I mean? Fred's got the exact same profile. And you have his eyes!"

This creeped me out. I said, "Are we supposed to be doing this?"

Freddy's five minutes younger than me. That and me beating him up all the time have made him cautious. "That's weird."

"Oh," she said, "I can't wait to see what he says when he sees you!"

"What?"

"Children, this is your dad." She blushed even pinker. Her voice shook to pieces. "I googled the agency and one thing led to another. Don't you get it? I've found your donor!"

Freddy barked, "Our *what*?"

"Mom, I thought he was a . . ."

She stared me down. "That's just a story I had to tell. For every single mom, there is a donor."

Donor. I said, "You mean like when we give money in church?"

"Not really," Mom said. "Well, sort of. It's more like. Oh. Gagh. Um. OK. The man decides he wants to give the world—well, like, a wonderful *present* of some cute little people that look a lot like him." She let it come rippling out, like a kindergarten teacher. "Like Santa Claus."

Freddy cleared his throat. Ah-hem. "Yeah, right."

She sighed. "Unless he did it for a price. But I promise, we've talked, and it isn't like that!"

I thought about poor Cecil. "You've *talked*?"

"Every night since I found him." A thousand light bulbs went on behind her face. "We're in love."

Freddy and I both went, "Mo-om."

"And we're going to visit him!"

That's when she told us about the land yacht. Freddy scowled but I am excited. We're leaving Thursday, first thing.

It's not like we're driving out to meet some internet weirdo. She says they've been talking since before Cecil moved out, which was quite a while ago, and they're in love. Amazing what you don't know about your mother when you think she's told you everything.

So it isn't just a gang of sperms like Mom told us, like it was nothing. There was a guy involved. A living, breathing person who looks like us. Cool picture, right there on his Friendster page. He's tall with a hawk nose, like my twin brother Freddy, and he's got green eyes, like me. It says here we like the same music and he loves swimming and tennis, just exactly like me so I guess I take after him, which is cool. Lord knows I'm nothing like Mom, she is way too intense and she has a really, really short fuse.

After they get married I can take him to the Father-Daughter Breakfast at our school.

So Freddy and me are packing and Mom is down at the mall, no cheapo internet outfits for *this* trip.

"Put in your best clothes, kids, you want to make a good first impression." She went out the door beaming, "I can't *wait* to see what he says!"

Nina

Stanley. Really, it's too perfect. I am in love with a Stan.

I fell in love the minute the twins were born. The nurses cleaned them off and put them in my arms. They nested and snuggled in. A girl. A boy. So handsome and so pretty. So perfect. His gift. And I know he loves me. How could he not love me, when he gave me this?

How could you not want to find a man like that, how could you not want to be with him forever and give him all the babies he wants?

At the beginning, of course, I had to tell them some story. Keep it impersonal. You came from a test tube. That's all you need to know.

How could I not look at those babies and know there was a man out there who loved me, but his twins were teething and I had to wait.

It took forever to get his name out of the agency and the first eight times I couldn't, and I tried everything. OK, it's in my contract that you don't. I back burned the project until I realized if I waited much longer the twins would be old enough to vote. Freddy swaggers like the big boys and Suzie has beginning hooters, and they're only in fourth grade!

I hired a guy. He hacked into the agency database, looking for the owner of the, well, genetic material. It wasn't hard getting in. It was only a little hard, figuring out which one. Then we found him and I had to wait.

The man I love turned out to be married. How could I walk in on a happy couple with his twins? Childless, I noted. Poor, sweet man.

Well, I have wonderful news for you.

Naturally I kept my distance, but I followed his footprints all over the web. The new company in Encino. The vice presidency, the house in the Palisades, and then . . . my breakthrough.

We met in a support group for the newly divorced. OK, I joined under false pretenses. I made up some story and he liked my posts. After that, Friendster was a piece of cake. And the best part? I posted my prettiest photo and a whole bunch of his interests that somehow turned out to be my interests too, and it was a hop, skip, and a jump to me mailing him. He seemed surprised. Then he was pleased. I mailed him pictures, of course. We e-mailed until we found an online place where we could talk privately. In love, it's wisest to proceed with caution but when you meet the perfect person, it turns out you have a lot to say. Oh, those wonderful long nights typing to each other in the dark. I'm sorry, Cecil. You were a sweet boy but nobody comes between me and my fate.

He phoned. It's easier to unburden in the dark. His wife left him for an unwed father, something about wanting kids, she said on the way out the door, so, fine! I can't wait to see his face when his very own children come knocking at the door.

My friend Nelda thinks this is a really bad idea. We are drinking Coolatas in the food court at the mall. "You have no idea who this guy is."

I tell her this is the father of my children. The man I've been waiting for all my life.

"How do you know, when you don't know anything about him?"

"Don't worry," I say, "We've told each other everything."

She gives me a look.

"Well, almost everything. Oh, Nelda, I'm in love."

"That doesn't mean he wants to see you."

"Of course he does. I'll call and let you know how it works out."

"You quit your job and you don't know how it's going to work out?"

"It's only a temporary leave!" Of course that's what I told them, but I know we aren't coming back. Great big house in a good school district. Perfect for the family. I tell her, "Nelda, we're a family."

Her eyes are like gun slits. Inside, she is taking aim. "Does everybody agree with you?"

I slap a twenty on the table. "Go buy yourself a box of Munchkins. You need to sweeten up."

I am doing wardrobe for this trip. In love as in business, presentation

is key. Dress in my best color. High end shoes. Camping outfits for the trip. Residential RV was a must. I needed to make certain preparations. A fallback plan in case this didn't play out the way I thought. Always have a fallback plan. First rule of corporate life.

I found a land yacht. Dromedary, top of the line. Kitchen. Little sofas that turn into beds. Nice bathroom, where I can shower and get fixed up before I go to the front door and ring the bell. I dropped a few thousand more customizing the interior, don't ask. Look, this is the chance of a lifetime and the sky's the limit here. Besides, I made a tidy profit when my broker cashed out my portfolio.

These are not decisions you make until you know.

Don't worry, Nelda, I don't move without thinking first. I have made certain preparations. Besides, we're perfect for each other. I have proof! His e-mails. Certain things he's said. And the kids . . . How could he not be ravished by his beautiful, wonderful twins? His get and image. His exact genetic set.

Well, the best of both of ours. I am no rock star, but I have my fans and Stan himself has told me he loves the way my hair looks, like plumes curling around my throat.

I am a romantic, but I have a good business head. I don't sell everything I have and drive a new RV across the country on spec.

We're in love.

Freddy

She says don't worry, we're going to love him, but I don't. I don't even know him. I don't like him either, and we haven't rightly met.

She says isn't this fun, but it isn't. We've been trapped like sardines in this humongous trailer thing for days.

She says don't worry, he loves us, he just has to get to know us.

Yeah, right. On the road she wouldn't even talk to us. She said not now, go play. Have you tried to play in a trailer? It's like playing in the small end of a gerbil run. She said go read, she was too busy talk to us, but we ran out of books. Suzie and I were bored of it after the first week, and Mom? She was way too happy, going along. She just hummed and talked into her cell phone as we rode out of Death Valley and into California. She was bent on this trip and she wouldn't stop for anything. After all, we had food and flush toilets, everything a person needed, right here.

Besides, she was in a hurry to get to him.

"California. The Inland empire." She waved at desert on either side of the freeway and she said, "Isn't this beautiful?"

Not so much.

She said, "Just wait till we get to the house!"

It took forever to get there and once we got to these Pacific Palisades and found the place she didn't stop, she kept riding around the block.

"Don't worry," she said when we mentioned this. "This time next week you'll be living in that beautiful house, and kids, it has a pool!"

Yeah, right.

No way was it like she promised when we got to the house and she finally stopped. She wasn't exactly talking, it was more like singing or whispering, which was bad, because you couldn't tell which. "This is it, kids. We're home."

Then why did she spend such a long time getting ready in the back? She looked great when she finally got out and went up to the door. She had on high heels like hardly ever, and her new red dress.

This guy came to the door, looked nice enough, from here. What he really looked was, he looked surprised. Suzie went, "Oh-oh."

We don't exactly have a secret language but I know what she meant. I was like, "Yeah."

Suzie said, "This is nothing like I thought."

"What did you think, Suze. What did you think would happen, really?"

My twin sister blushed all over and wouldn't look at me. "I guess I was thinking what Mom thought."

I said, "That's because you're a damn girl," and she started to cry.

Meanwhile they were talking up there, out on the front steps to his house. How come they weren't going in? At first he was grinning. She opened up her arms. After a while they hugged. Then they talked some and that seemed to be going OK, Mom smiled the way she does when she thinks things are going well. Then she took his hand. She put on her business meeting face to let him know this next part was serious. The one she puts on when she lays things out for people, you know. One. Two. Three. We saw her waving back at us hanging out of the Dromedary. We saw him jerk around and stare. We couldn't hear what she was saying because this thing is airtight, but you didn't have to be standing right there with them to get the idea.

We started to get out. We both had showers and we had on flashing Adidas and matching T-shirts. And great big smiles. We were all set to run up on the porch shouting, "Daddy," like she told us, but she scowled and waved us back.

Weird, though. Probably he wasn't too excited to have two nice new children, but if they're as much in love as Mom says they are, you've gotta wonder why he didn't invite us in.

When she came back to the Dromedary she was crying. It's been like that ever since.

Now that we're parked in Santa Monica, she just sits in the front seat and cries. And Suzie and me? We can't get near the ocean, and it's right there in front of us. She won't let us go. We have to read and play games and hush because she says we have to be ready to roll as soon as she sorts this out.

I thought this thing was cool when we first got it, with the built-in flush toilet and the fold-out table and retractable bunk beds and the secret place in the back but now, if you want to know the truth? It's a great big frickin' rolling jail. We are stopped cold *this close* to the ocean, for whatever that's worth. Not much, since she won't let us get out. I don't care what she calls it, this isn't a yacht, it's more like a tin can. When she gets out and slams the doors on us our ears pop. What it is, is, it's a trap.

Suzie

I am worried about Mom. It's been days now, and we haven't been outside. We haven't seen our father, either, in spite of what she thought. OK, I thought so too until we got right up there to the house and she pointed to us and he wasn't glad, like she promised. Like, she couldn't see it? He didn't want us there.

Since then, I guess she has been thinking.

They've talked, I think. She goes outside to take her calls. I guess this morning's one went well. New outfit on Mom today. Her lettuce dress and nice shoes. She left us in this thing and took off in a rented car.

"I'm going to visit your father," she said in that tone that screams, *don't mess with me*. Weird, she had a whole bunch of our report cards in a folder, along with our baby books. Bookends—our bronzed baby shoes! My merit badge sash from the Brownies. Freddy's ribbon from the Science Fair. "Oh, your dad will be so proud of you. I'll be bringing him back today, so keep the place nice."

"What if he doesn't want to come?"

"Oh, I've taken care of that." She had this smile. "Stay put."

We kind of have to, since she security-locked us in. Not every RV has one-way locks. She paid extra to get it done. She paid for that and for the special compartment she won't let us into, you know, in the back. I don't know what she's got in there but she goes in there at night when she thinks we're asleep. We can hear her clinking glass. Moving stuff around. Fixing it up. Testing the door after she comes back out and seals it up.

Out on the grass between us and the road leading down to the ocean and, oh, wow, the pier, other kids are skateboarding and playing ball. We could wave and yell and all, but they won't hear us. They won't even see us through the tinted glass. This thing is built like a refrigerator, really. Air tight. It's cool, all right, because the A.C. is going, but we are breathing air that's been in here with us all week. Freddy's trying to carve his initials in the glass with his jackknife but it isn't working, and I've been trying to get into the secret compartment but it's sealed tighter than Scrooge's pocket-book, and you want to know what? This sucks. It really sucks.

Stan

What did she think, looking me up after all these years, that I would be thrilled to see her? Interested, yes. But, women. Did she think she was the only woman in my life?

When I distributed the sperm, it wasn't to a single, very select recipient. My children will spread wide, and take big steps in the world. I am seeing to that.

Interesting, how naïve women are. Did she really think I didn't know who she was from the get-go, or that I didn't keep track of every one of them?

About a dozen, thank you, and my children are doing fine.

You probably wonder what takes a man like me to a high-end sperm bank. Well, exclusivity. Women who are smart enough to afford it have the hard-driving qualities that make for success. And the need to make a mark. Like me.

That, I will do, as will my children, through all the generations. As soon as they grow up. Believe me, I take care of my children, and believe me, I keep track. I have a very special way of keeping track.

And the desire to have other women bear my children?

The wife was barren. I decided the day she confessed. How lucky I am. Joanna's barren but I have a dozen now.

Unfortunately, she found out. I loved her and I miss her. Never mind, it opened the door to Phase Two. A good father follows up. Amazing how women come flocking once they find out you're divorced.

Unfortunately, they haven't all worked out, so with this one, I'm taking my time. Playing it cool. I have two beautiful *what?*

Sent her away. Make it too easy and she'll think you have ulterior motives. Can't afford to let her think that. Keep them at a distance until the closing. Move slowly. This one may turn out to be Mrs. Right.

For a week I limit her to long phone conversations, I tell her I need time. We are feeling each other out. Let her into my life in phases, one step at a time. When I think she's ready I say, Sure, but one thing, if you want to make a go of this. Leave the children behind.

Oh, she says, I never leave my children. I say, OK then. Two days of this and finally she agrees. She comes to my front door smiling and dressed for a party. I let her in. She admires the place. My decor. I don't tell her that after Joanna left I rebuilt according to my own specifications. I say let's have a drink. When we get to know each other better, I'll show her the rest of the house. After an hour of this we are locked together on the sofa.

"Oh," she says into my ear after we finish, "you're wonderful."

I am somewhat more cautious in my assessment. "So are you."

The father of twelve has to be cautious. I have my responsibilities. I have my dreams. I say, "Would you like to see the rest of the house?"

"Oh look, there's a pool out back." She's beaming. It's somewhat disconcerting.

"A wonderful place for children, don't you think?"

Her face gets even brighter. Her answer is even more disconcerting. Like a bride, she says, "I do."

I look at her carefully. Of all the mothers, I think, she just may be the right one. I show her the yard. "As you can see, plenty of room for monkey bars and a jungle gym."

She says, "The twins aren't very athletic."

We are moving fast. "Every child needs to be fit. I want my kids to have quick reflexes. Large motor skills."

"If you think so, Stan," she says like a sweet little wife.

This is going very well.

I show her the playroom, which is fitted with chessboards and Monopoly sets and, in the corner, a PlayStation.

"Oh," she says. "The kids will love this."

I slip, but only a little bit. "They do."

If she hears, she does not record it. She says, "It's as if you really want children."

I say, "I have children." I do not say, a dozen. She isn't ready yet.

Her smile is embarrassing. Gratified. Smug. That breathy voice: "You do!"

I show her the bedrooms, finished but not furnished. "They get to pick out their own furniture."

"The twins are going to love this."

"When they're ready," I say. I do not remind her that the twins are not the only ones. "Now let me show you the best part."

I am watching her carefully. Good looking woman, overdressed for this visit but intelligent. Collected. The way she went about the search and the way she proceeded once I let her find me prove that she has good judgment and superb managerial skills.

"It's a beautiful house," she says, to keep the conversation going. Good. Sharp social skills. She just may be the right one, I think. Time to test the waters.

I say, "Happy children need a woman's touch."

Her head comes up. Does she see where we are going with this? Not a bit of it. She is smiling. I see a pink glow begin at the cleavage and creep up her neck. "I know."

"I can't wait to show you the rest." First I show her the room I have specially fitted out for home schooling. Flat screen TV for educational DVDs. Walk-in cooler for fresh fruit and nutritious drinks. Apricot leather, as a special treat. Appropriately cooled, to keep my children attentive. Lots of light and sunshine, to keep them content.

"Stan." She sounds dubious. She is not as delighted as I'd hoped. "This is perfectly wonderful. But don't you think they're going to miss the kids at school?"

"Don't worry. They'll have plenty of company." I am studying her intently now. "With the right woman in charge . . ."

She looks up into my eyes. We are negotiating. "And you think I may be the right. . . ."

"Mother."

"For the twins? God, Stan. I hope so! Haven't I borne them for you and brought them up?"

I murmur, *you aren't the only one*, but she doesn't want to hear. She is looking at her watch. "Good grief, they've been cooped up for too long. I have to go get them now."

"One more thing," I say. We are approaching the moment of decision.

"I'd love to bring them up here for a swim."

"Not yet," I say.

She blushes. "I'm sorry if I'm going too fast. I thought you were . . . I thought we were . . ."

"We are." We aren't. Not yet. But we are close.

"Then can't I just . . ."

"Not yet," I say. "There's one more thing."

We are going through the back yard, past the pool and to the base of the mountain that rises right behind the house. I need for her to understand what I am doing, and to pledge to keep what we do here secret. Assuming that there is going to be a *we*.

I push aside the bushes. I tell her why I had them but not how I collected them. Now it's time to show her how I keep them in place. I open the door. I lead her in and show her what's below. Ten others. Adorable, really, but not ready to learn everything I have to teach. "As you might guess," I tell her, "This took a long time to prepare." I say in a loud voice, "Hello, children." On good days, they answer back.

At my back she is craning, trying to see what I have done here and how. None will answer. They have stopped answering. A couple are moaning. Too bad.

Her voice goes up. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking care of my children!"

"Oh," she cries. "This is awful."

"No it's not. I'm their natural father."

"There's nothing natural about this." She is pulling out her cellphone. "I'm calling the police!"

And all the time I thought she might be the one. Too bad. Now I tell her what I have to. "Be careful what you say, lady."

"Lady!"

I jog her hand and the phone sails like a flying cockroach. "Nobody comes between me and my kids."

I do what I have to and put her down the cistern with the others. I go through her purse before I dump it and take out the keys.

Now I'm going to get them. Suzanna. Frederick. My last two. ○

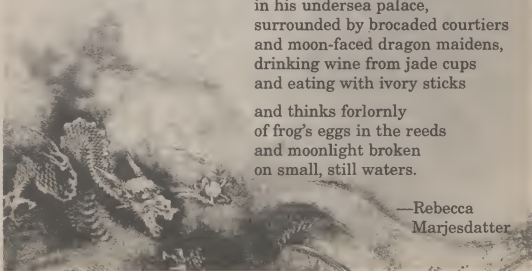
PREPONDERANCE OF THE SMALL

Perhaps
the carp,
transformed into a dragon,

sits upon his jeweled lotus throne
in his undersea palace,
surrounded by brocaded courtiers
and moon-faced dragon maidens,
drinking wine from jade cups
and eating with ivory sticks

and thinks forlornly
of frog's eggs in the reeds
and moonlight broken
on small, still waters.

—Rebecca
Marjesdatter



A native and resident of Easton, Pennsylvania, and the grandfather of "three incredibly cute and talented children," Michael Flynn makes his living as a management consultant in statistical methods and quality management. He is the author of the *Firestar* series and, most recently, the critically well-received novel, *The Wreck of the River of Stars*. His short fiction has appeared in *Analog*, *Asimov's*, *F&SF*, and elsewhere. Mike has been a Hugo nominee four times and won the Sturgeon prize for his *Asimov's* story, "House of Dreams" (October/November 1997). His next novel, *Eifelheim*, will be released from Tor in October. In his first story for us in nine years, Mike masterfully explores the after effects of a disaster that seems to swallow up the . . .

DAWN, AND SUNSET, AND THE COLOURS OF THE EARTH

Michael F. Flynn

At six-thirty of an early fall morning, when the sun was just lighting the evergreens and new snow glistened atop Ranier, Motor Vessel *Hyak* left Pier 52 in Seattle, bound for Bremerton. A Washington State Ferry of the Super Class, longer than a football field, she grossed 2700 tons dead weight and drew eighteen and a half feet. She cast off with nearly a thousand souls aboard and motored into a fog in the center of Elliott Bay.

None of them were ever seen again.

Chino Mendez

People say at first what business has a poor fisherman to speak of Jesus? I have no education, no clever words. I have nothing but the high school and many years of chasing the tuna. But then I thought: what better thing for a preacher than to start as a fisherman? There is precedent, no?

I will give my witness as I saw it, so you may believe with me.

Understand that I was a sinner before. This is important. I drank and I gambled and I had women. Oh, yes. Perhaps you do not think so to look at me, but women find me attractive. I have cut men in fights. Perhaps I killed a man in Miami, but this I do not know for sure.

I tell you this because you must understand what I was, so that you may understand what I am, and so understand what I say. If one as lost as me can be found, there is hope for all.

I was christened Ipolito, but my friends have always called me Chino, because of my eyes. Oh, yes, there were many Chinese brought to Cooba years ago and their blood runs in me. I have been a fisherman all my life, even before I fled Cooba. I fished the Gulf, and then the Keys, and then I came here to these strange, cold waters. *Capitan* Norris give me a place on his *Esmeralda* and he teach me the waters of the Sound and there were many very hard years, but never did I complain. Well, perhaps a little.

That morning we cast off and took our bearing on Duwamish Head. The dawn was behind us and the air shimmer like the rainbow. The horizon glowed red; the sky above me, blue; and all the colors ranged between. Oh, the salt tang of the sea! Oh, the cries of the gulls! They swoop in a great circle around the bay. Around and around. I look back now and I see how clear were all my senses that day.

We hear the horn of the ferry as she left the pier and for a time our paths run side by side, the great ferry and the humble fishing boat, but the *capitan* saw a fog is risen in the bay, so he turn the wheel a little to avoid it. The ferry, yes, had the radar and the global positioning, and so she sailed into the fog, her horn booming. I hear the churn of her engines as she pass us, and I see the people who lined the railing. Some were reading of the newspapers. Some were watching the scenery. Some were talking to each other. There was one—a young girl near the quarter rail—who saw me watching. She was, I think, twelve. She smile and wave to me and I wave back and the *capitan* saw, and our boat's whistle shrieked and the little girl, she clapped in delight.

But the *capitan* was fight the wheel. There was a strong current where there been no current before. I had the mad fancy that our boat sat . . . somehow . . . on the lip of a waterfall. We struggled like salmon against it as it pull us into the fog, toward the ferry.

A collision with such a ship would destroy us, so Ngyuen and me—he is the other deckhand—we throw the bumpers over the side and stand by with the fending poles. When I look up again at the deck of the ferry, I see the little girl bathed in a golden-red light, such as one sees at dawn. The light came from out of the fog, you understand, and what sun has ever dawned in the west? It seem like all the ferry was aglow and I hear a

great shout from on board. The foghorn was taken on a sound like a train racing away. The little girl turned and faced into the fog and her mouth dropped open. Oh, it was a look of such delight! And she raised her hands to her face, and then the fog shrouded her, too, and everything—boat, foghorn, girl—vanished into silence.

I did not understand then what I had seen, but I have thought over it much since. The strange fog. The strange current. The great light and the shout. Even the birds that wheeled over the spot. How could such a large vessel vanish so completely and so quickly? I found the answer in the smile of a little child.

God had taken them all to Him, as a sign to the rest of us. That is why you will never find them or find the boat. That is why the girl smiled. All I was granted was the rainbow sign, but she had seen the pure light of heaven.

I have heard others say I must be wrong because there was nothing especially holy about the people on that ferry that day. Only a thousand ordinary people.

But don't you see?

That is the Good News.

Able Seaman Jimmy Lang

The helicopter is already warming up when Jimmy and the crew scramble out to the pad. He doesn't know what the alert is all about, only that something happened to the Bremerton ferry. Liz Coburn doesn't know either. "But it's not good news," she says. They check the rescue equipment on board.

It's hard to talk over the steady whop-whop of the blades, which is just as well, because Jimmy doesn't have much to say. He can never find the words when he needs them. He'll rehearse them in his head, and run through them over and over until he is sure they are the right words; but by the time they're ready to come out, the moment for them has passed.

Three frogs trot across the pad, already in their wet suits but carrying their flippers in their hands. Jimmy and Liz help them into the helicopter and Jimmy gives the high sign to the pilot.

He slides the cabin door shut and the chopper tilts and rises. The frogs are checking the air tanks and Jimmy tells them he already done that, but they just look at him and continue checking. Jimmy turns to the window and watches the water race past below them. A container ship is working its way into the harbor and Jimmy cranes his neck to watch it. What he wants to do is ask Liz if she'd go to a movie with him tonight, but what he says is, "Look how big that thing is."

"If that ferry's going down. . . ." Liz tells him. "Oh, God, *Hyak* can carry two thousand."

One of the frogs tells them that ATN *Puget Sound* is putting out with the barge and they'll try to get people up on that. "That's a good idea," Jimmy says, like they asked for his approval.

The chopper cants suddenly and changes direction and everyone in the cargo bay dances to keep their balance. Liz falls against Jimmy and Jimmy puts his arm around her waist to steady her. They are friends, him and Liz. "My good bud," Liz calls him. He thinks she might mean more than that, but he has never gotten up the nerve to ask.

The morning fog has mostly burned off by now. Only a large puff remains, floating in the waters like an iceberg. It is shot through with reflected colors—green from the waters, blue from the sky, brown from the earth, white from the clouds, tawny red from the dawn. Jimmy thinks the water looks funny, too. The waves are all a-jumble, some lapping toward the fog instead of toward the shore. "Looks purty," he tells Liz.

But Liz just shakes her head. "Where's the ferry? Ain't no sign of 'er."

Liz is, in Jimmy's estimation, the most perfect woman on Earth, after his maw. She's smart, but she doesn't laugh at him like other women and treats him nice, though not half so nice as he would like her to. He has not yet kissed her, although he imagines what that must be like.

"Can a boat sink that fast?" Jimmy asks; but Liz just shakes her head, and it worries him that a smart gal like her doesn't know.

The chopper swoops suddenly toward the fog and Jimmy hears the pilot say bad words.

"Wind shear," the co-pilot calls out, explaining the swerve. The frogs ask if there's a fix on the ferry, but the co-pilot shakes his head. "Something's wrong. VTS got three radar fixes, but they're three different positions, and too far away." With the wind the way it is, he'll drop them as close as he can to the last visual position.

Jimmy calls out "Aye" to show that he heard and he and Liz ready the hoist. They clip a sling to the end of the cable to lift people out of the water and onto the ATN's barge. They pile flotation devices by the sliding door. The frogs pull on their flippers and test their air.

"Ready back here," the chief tells the pilot.

The chopper hovers and Jimmy heaves the door open. This is the part he likes best: standing in the open doorway above the waves, with the wind buffeting his face, with the tang of salt on his lips. The buzz of the rotors fills the cabin and the spray splashes onto the deck. A brisk breeze streams toward the fog, and Jimmy fancies the fog is somehow sucking air into it.

Liz waves to the frogs and they step forward and drop the few feet into the bay, one-two-three. She looks out the door. "Ain't nobody in the water," she says.

"The frogs are there," Jimmy points out what he thinks an obvious oversight on her part.

"But who they gonna rescue?" Liz is angry, and Jimmy thinks it is at him for correcting her.

The helicopter rises, banks, and, caught in another sudden wind shear, tilts to one side. The pilot cries out. Jimmy can hear the fear even over the noise of the rotors. Liz slips on a puddle and slides down the canted deck and out the open door. Jimmy, who has been holding on to the hoist cable, reaches toward her as she slides past, but their fingers only touch before she is gone, and the last thing Jimmy sees is her scowl of annoyance.

He does not stop to think. "Man overboard!" he cries. The pilot brings the chopper around, and Jimmy readies the sling. Liz is a good swimmer, so he is not worried. He thinks they will laugh about it later, when the rescue is over.

He sees her swimming hard against a strong current. The pilot is fighting the turbulent winds and cannot get close enough for the hoist, so Jimmy unclips the flotation ring and throws it to her so that she does not wear herself out swimming.

He is a good thrower. He always wins when Group Seattle holds its Rescue Olympics. He puts the ring right beside her so that with two good strokes she grabs hold of it. She waves to him and Jimmy grins with pride as he waves back. He already thinks of the kind words she will say to him after she is pulled aboard. Maybe she will kiss him. Maybe . . . He blushes at the anticipation of memories.

Once she has grasped the ring, the strange riptide takes Liz into the rapidly diminishing fog. There is not much left of the mist now: a few corkscrew streamers. Seen through the haze, the water looks different, darker and redder. Jimmy searches for Liz through the mist but does not spot her.

Even when at last the fog is entirely gone, there is no sign of her.

The chopper circles and circles and when finally it must return to base, Jimmy is crying like a baby.

Only one of the frogs comes back with them, and he does not say much of anything.

Mitch Raftery

S_o.

If you're married to a bitch, a dockside bar can be a haven. When you order a bourbon and water, you call it "comfort food," which earns a short grin from the bartender. He asks no questions. He doesn't care *why* you drink.

"Get a job, get a job," you tell your bourbon. "And what's it matter if it's all the way to hell and Bremerton to get it." This is more than the bartender really wants to know, but he ventures that a good job is a good thing to have.

"Never said it was a 'good' job," you correct him. "Look at me. I got a degree, an MBA. So I should clerk at some two-bit operation?" You don't tell him about the truly skilled accounting work you've done, the kind that got you fired from your last job, or about your ever-loving's mountain of debt that drove you to it. He's got no Need To Know.

Better than nothing, the bartender suggests. I'm a BS in chemistry.

You hold up your now-empty glass. "Then how about some 'better living through chemistry'?"

Now you're talking his language. So, you drink a while and chat in a desultory manner. The bartender comments on the thick fog that has shrouded the harbor. You don't think fog at dawn on Elliott Bay is any-

thing remarkable, but you remark anyway. Yes, that is the thickest and most unusual cloud of vapors ever known to mankind—excluding the cloud of vapors you gave your bitch-wife after the boss caught you with your hand in the till, although you don't share that particular tidbit, either. Sure, the firm didn't file charges, but only because the partners didn't want to invite an audit. So who's the bigger crook? "Everybody does it," you mutter.

Your wife would never have understood anyway. She would never have accepted the blame. Ask the boss for a raise. Tell the boss you need a raise. As if the boss *cared* what anyone needed. Was there a credit card anywhere on the face of the planet that was not maxed out? Was there an ATM anywhere in Seattle that did not hemorrhage cash as through a suppurating wound?

"Never marry a rich girl," you tell the bartender, and he tells you there's no danger of that, just as if you cared what *sow he* porked. Don't marry a pretty one, either, he adds, or other guys will always be sniffing around.

Yeah, and a rich pretty girl is the worst of both worlds. Too used to spendthrift wealth; too used to flattering beaus. What matter if *you* have to work late because you need the OT because her skinflint parents didn't approve of Little Precious marrying "down" and won't shell out dime one to help? No reason why that should hamper the good times or the club-hopping. No reason why *she* can't always have the best.

And her old man, he has to blah-blah-blah how *he* started with nothing, too, and how he *envies* you the same challenge. And what a sanctimonious, bullshit, self-righteous excuse for selfishness that is. Okay, maybe the old fart really had started poor, but then he hadn't married the National Debt, either. No, he had to beget that one, spoil it rotten, and pass it on to you.

"I'd've paid it back," you tell the empty glass in front of you. The way the markets were growing, the money should have multiplied like loaves and fishes long before the comptroller noticed the transaction. And it had. So you waited. Just a little bit more, just a little bit more, and the stock value went up and up and up until there was nothing left, and how could that much money evaporate like the morning fog?

Except this morning's fog is not evaporating. A deep, extended blast pierces the dawn and you start on your barstool because you know it's the ferry casting loose and you are supposed to be on that ferry heading for a job interview in God-forsake-us Bremerton. Oh, Honey-bun will ream you fair if you screw this one up.

You slap a president down on the bar top without even looking to see who it is and stagger out onto the sidewalk. Alaskan Way is nearly empty, as if everyone has stood aside to make room for your hopeless sprint to the pier.

By the time you reach Pier 52, winded and disheveled, the ferry is gone. You curse and shake a fist. Why is it that you *never* have any luck?

A score of people mill about dockside now, sharing their mutual ignorance of events. You hear something about the ferry vanishing and you turn and gawp at him. "You mean it sank?" He nods. Hundreds dead for sure; maybe more than a thousand. The crowd is buzzing now, approach-

ing that critical mass where uninformed speculation implodes into a hard knot of impermeable belief. Stunned sorrow clashes with ghoulish wonder. The networks are coming! Oh, the networks are coming!

You shade your eyes against the dazzle of the waves and you see nothing. No boats. No one in the water. A lone frogman being hoisted into the 'copter. Words tumble from the lips around you: Tragedy. Catastrophe. Terrorists. Aliens. Sea Monster. But the one word that occurs to you, you do not voice, and that is Opportunity. And your rage evaporates with the last of the fog.

Poor Mitch Raftery! He has drowned with all the others. Your wife will think so; her parents will; your employers past and prospective will. Why, you have become as one already dead. You can hear the drumming of the dirt on your coffin lid, the lying words of sorrow spoken over you by people who never gave a shit when you were alive. But your death is your salvation, for you can rise again—and not wait any three damn days to do it. You can be born again through the waters of this most peculiar baptism, cleansed of all past sins. You can start fresh, with a new name, a clean slate, hobbled no longer by a spendthrift wife, or skinflint in-laws, or hypocritical bosses. Without those shackles, how high might you soar?

It is a shining vision, and you stand there dockside stunned by the beauty of it. "By God," you mutter, "I'll have the life I deserve."

So.

You slip anonymously from the docks, plans already whirling through your mind. There are ways to acquire driver's licenses and ID cards. You know a few people. You can make a new start in a new city; you can live a new life.

You can become a new Mitch Raftery.

Dolly Mannerheim

If beauty lies in the eye of the beholder, so at times does mere existence. Howard Mannerheim was a man so ordinary that he vanished into the wallpaper of the world long before he vanished from it.

Dolly Mannerheim, his wife, was a tall woman who managed somehow to appear stocky. It was something in her posture. She was embarrassed to be seen in public with her husband, who was shorter by a head, and so in consequence they did not go out much. Howard never noticed, which was part of the problem.

Her parents had named her "Medallion" for no better reason than a couple of tokens from an especially potent stash the night following the delivery. Dolly-the-child had thought her name Seriously Cool, but she was past forty now and it seemed now less cool than affected. "Dolly" was not much better—resonance of child, resonance of plaything—but she did not know what else she might call herself.

She saw Howard off that morning as she usually did. He was a consulting engineer working at a construction site outside Bremerton. Dolly thought it was an office complex or perhaps a dam—something which at

any rate required a lot of wire and concrete and steel. It was also, *mirabile dictu*, a local assignment—which meant that Howard could actually come home each day, a circumstance not without its complications.

It was his habit to catch the six-thirty ferry, so Dolly would get up with sandpaper eyes and ensure a breakfast and a cab to take him down Queen Anne Hill to the ferry dock. "You take such good care of me," he told her, sitting down to a bowl of soggy flakes drowned in milk. Perhaps he meant it—he was not a demanding man—but he always said the same thing, so perhaps he didn't mean much. Howard was a creature of habits and she had learned (or had convinced herself) over the years that there was behind that compendium of tics and routines no genuine person. Were it not for clichés, he would sit dumb.

At the door, the cab already waiting, Dolly offered him her cheek and he gave it the usual perfunctory benediction before walking down the steps, where the cabbie, had he been listening, might have heard him mutter something about "dry sticks."

Afterward, she just had time to shower and don a blouse and a pair of plain brown slacks before Rick scampered across from next door. He always leapt the fence that separated their two back yards. He never came around to the front door. In part, this was respect for the proprieties (which made it a hypocritical act). In the other part, it was a display of prowess. (Which made it a cocksure act. It was a picket fence he vaulted.)

Dolly let him into the kitchen and he followed her to the bedroom, where they had sex. Some days they might have a drink or two first. In the beginning, she had always taken a few drinks, even before the discreet knock at the kitchen door.

When Rick was engrossed *in medias res*, she whispered urgently, "Howard's at the door! He must have missed the ferry!" And she laughed when he, for a moment, stiffened in alarm.

"I wish you wouldn't do that!" he said (for this was not the first time she had whispered wolf in his ear). But in fact, the possibility that Howard *would* miss his boat and *would* walk in upon her was the only excitement left to Dolly in the affair, which had progressed by stages from the unthinkable to the routine. While Howard's assignments had been out of town, she and Rick had enjoyed intimate clubs and fine meals and nights spent on satin in upscale hotels. There had been an electricity to it then. Confined now to the occasional morning or afternoon liaison, the flames had faded to coals, and coals to ashes.

Rick had no idea of this. He thought he mattered. But it had been the dancing and the dining and the shows, not Rick's qualities as a lover, that had led Dolly to him. He was no Adonis. As the world measured these things, Howard actually had the edge. Nor was he especially attentive or romantic. What he was, was convenient.

There were days when she *wanted* to summon Howard on his cell phone and bring him back on some pretext. She wanted something to happen. Anything. Even confrontation. If she could not have the heat of passion, she would have the heat of anger. Lacking either, she had gone cold. And yet, though she thought of it often, she could never quite bring herself to do it.

Later, in the front room, she served coffee, and that peculiar silence descended in which by unspoken consent she and Rick would not talk about what they did. Rick, standing by the front window, pulled the curtain a little to the side and remarked how empty the streets seemed with everyone off to work or school—as if some pestilence had caused humanity to disappear.

Dolly was sitting in her television chair. “I wish *Howard* would disappear,” she responded with sudden, quiet, and terrible sincerity.

Rick thought she meant so that they could drop the secrecy and be together openly, and he preened just a bit, for he desired above all else to be desired. But Dolly had not been thinking of him. In a way, she hadn’t even been thinking of Howard; but afterward she could never quite convince herself that it was mere coincidence.

Rick started at the door chimes and Dolly, with malice aforethought, strode to the door as if to throw it open with him in plain sight; but she paused with her hand on the knob until she heard the kitchen door click closed. She smiled a little at that, at what it said about Rick, at what it said about her. Then the bell rang again, and this time she did open the door.

It was Lillian Gelberson from down the corner. Lillian was a young woman who wore glasses only for effect and operated a blog out of her home. Dolly (who had no idea what a web log was) had privately named her Miss Perky, by which she did not intend a compliment. Lillian had the irritating habit of beginning conversations in the middle. “Oh, Dolly! I’m so sorry,” she announced in a voice apparently intended to be sympathetic, but which sounded instead only cryptic.

“About what?” Dolly said, wondering if Lillian had seen or heard Rick’s departure. Perhaps the woman was sorry that Dolly needed a lover, or that the lover was Rick, or that she herself had no hope of getting one of her own. Dolly was glad something had come along to shoo Rick away, but she was not especially glad that it had been Lillian.

“About what? Ohmigod! You mean you haven’t heard? Ohmigod! The *Hyak*! It’s gone! And then I thought, ohmigod, isn’t that the ferry that your husband takes?”

“What do you mean *gone*?” Dolly asked in irritation. “Of course it’s gone. It leaves at six-thirty.”

“No, no. I mean *vanished*. *Disappeared*. Ohmigod, helicopters have been crisscrossing the bay and there’s not a trace.” She knew this because she had been following the breaking news on the web, uploading links to her blog, trading overwrought IMs. (Nothing is quite so invigorating to a certain turn of mind than the safe proximity of disaster.) Her window opened on a view of the bay, but it had not occurred to her to look out of it. The Web was All.

Dolly failed at first to understand. The words came at her too fast and all a-jumble. “Do you mean the ferry *sank*? How can that happen?” Ferries sank in the Philippines, ferries sank in Bangladesh. They did not sink in Elliott Bay.

“We don’t know yet,” Lillian told her. “The fog was in, and people down the harbor say the *Hyak* never came out the other side.” Lillian continued to chatter hyperkinetic sympathy, but Dolly stopped listening after that.

"Disappeared. . . ." she whispered. Perhaps Howard would not be coming home, after all. Rick would like that. Or would he?

She was sitting on the sofa with no recollection of having gotten there. Lillian was beside her, holding her hands. Go away, she thought at the woman. Go away. But the words never reached her lips. She didn't want company. She didn't want to be alone. "Two thousand, did you say?"

Lillian may have speculated on how full the vessel had been, but all she said to Dolly was, "It's Howard that matters now," which was not strictly factual, but which might have been paradoxically true. Howard *mattered* because he was no longer *matter*.

"Dolly, is there anything I can do?"

Images of Lillian Gelbersen in scuba gear searching amidst the sunken hulk of M.V. *Hyak*, hoisting wreckage from the water, performing mouth to mouth resuscitation. *Do what*, Dolly wondered. "Be careful what you wish for," she murmured, but Lillian did not quite hear.

As the weeks followed and the media ran through their paradigm, her remorse grew ever more intolerable. Each time they showed one of the awkward snapshots on the evening news, she cringed. At meetings of "The Families of the Victims." (And of course there were such meetings. A regiment of grief counselors flew into Seattle to prolong the agony.) Dolly would avoid the other spouses and families and significant others, would not even meet their eyes. Everyone took this as profound grief. No one recognized it as guilt.

Perhaps a thousand wives had wished their husbands gone that morning. It was not beyond belief. But Dolly did not believe it. As nearly as she could estimate, the *Hyak* had vanished at the very moment when she had wished Howard gone. But the elves that grant the wishes oft have cruel streaks in them. She had never intended that a thousand others vanish with him. The weight of a thousand was as the weight of a single one. There was something about that in the Bible. Or in the Koran. Or in a fortune cookie she had once read.

The media christened it *The Disappearance*. They early on capitalized the whole business and assigned the roles that everyone was to play. No one ever found any bodies. No flotsam ever graced the shores of Elliott Bay. Consequently, Dolly and the others like her were presented as grieving-but-ever-hopeful that their loved ones would somehow, someday come back. (Although from where, no one seemed quite sure.) And so, she must play Penelope to Howard's Odysseus.

For a time, Rick concurred. In the spotlight of publicity, his stealthy visits might seem unseemly; and so he abstained for a time out of respect for the dead and also out of a little self-interest. But he never did understand why, after the commotion had died and the cameras sought elsewhere for sensation, Dolly did not re-open that kitchen door. He's gone, he told her again and again. He's never coming back. (Not that it had ever mattered when he had.) Dolly could not explain it either, and, after a time, Rick found another neighbor or a co-worker or maybe even his ex-wife.

Dolly no longer needed a lover. Somehow, by vanishing completely, Howard had become ubiquitous, and occupied her life without the bother of actually being present in it. His absence was consequential in a way that

his presence had never been. She was asked about him constantly: by friends and relatives, by interviewers for magazines and television stations. She appeared on Conan with a half dozen other bereaved and was applauded by the audience, as if the loss of her husband had been some sort of accomplishment on her part—as indeed she had convinced herself it had.

Dinah Comfort

How bright and empty the bay looks from here. Not a cloud in the sky, not a bit of haze over the water. I can almost reach out past the headland and touch Seattle. They call it the Emerald City, but it all looks golden, somehow, in the sunset.

No boats out on the water. The pleasure craft cower in their marinas, for there is no pleasure in this sunset. The tankers and freighters huddle at dock or have scurried here to Bremerton. Even the Coast Guard cutter has put up. Everyone is afraid to venture out onto the Bay. The waters look so lonely.

He was always late, Ken was. That was his problem from the very start. Never home on time. Always working late, “plugging away at the office.” Plugging away, all right. Plugging a secretary, all legs and ass, damn him. Or hoisting a few with “the boys.” *Sorry, I lost track of the time.* And whatever happened to the man I married? He lost track of him, too, somewhere along the way.

He never went looking for love; it always fell into his lap and he never learned how to say no. He hadn’t even stayed true to his secretary, the little skirt-hiking bitch. (And so she had forwarded all those e-mails. Treat your wife as you will; but *never* anger your mistress.)

Ken never thinks ahead, seldom behind. A narrow window around the present moment is all the reality he ever knows. He couldn’t even understand why I was still angry with him after he said he was sorry. But that was the problem, wasn’t it? He really was sorry—at that moment, at that time and place—and he really thought a few ritual words wiped away his sins. Inside his head, the whole affair was already Past History and it was somehow *my* fault that it was still an issue.

It’s done. It’s over. Let’s move on.

No, Ken, it isn’t that easy. I won’t have it be that easy.

But just this once, Ken, could you please be late?

Okay, you had her for the weekend. Our little Cindi, our darling, our treasure. Little Cindi with the sunlight smile. I know you love her, too, in your own lunkheaded, irresponsible way. Dammit, you still love *me*, in your lunkheaded, irresponsible way. I know you like to see her. You’re still her father, Ken. Oh, tardy, forgetful, flighty Ken. God, you were such fun to be with when responsibility didn’t matter. I can still remember what we once had. I’ll never take you back, but I feel sad that I never will.

Cindi looks forward so to these visits, and it doesn’t make me jealous, not really. You pamper her too much, and I guess I can see why. You don’t have her every day the way I do. You can afford to pamper, but I have to

discipline, and that seems a little lopsided, because at twelve Cindi doesn't understand why I have to be mean when you never are. But it wouldn't be fair to ask you to discipline her when you can't even discipline yourself. You're only supposed to keep her for three days, and I know I've been bitchy before when you've kept her too long.

I forgot, you said. I lost track of the time.

Just this once, just this once, just this once, I hope you lost track of the time. I hope you overslept. I hope you got tied up in traffic. I hope you forgot my complaints. I hope you missed putting her on the ferry.

Twelve. Almost a woman. Almost a person instead of a child. Just beginning to feel the changes taking place inside her. Just beginning to realize the universe of possibilities lying in wait. But still a child. Still our little girl.

It's getting cold here. I should have brought a sweater with me, but who knew the wait would be this long? Who knows how long it will be?

The *Hyak* will reappear someday. That weird fog will roll in again. It will grow thick over the bay and coat everything with chill and damp. And the ferry horn will sound, and the *Hyak* will sail out of the mist as she sailed into it. Maybe she won't know why I'm crying, Cindi won't. Maybe for her only a moment will have passed. That's the way things happen in Faerie. I'll grow old, and she'll stay young forever.

It could be this very night. Or tomorrow. There's always a fog in the morning. Someone needs to be here when the ferry arrives. Someone needs to be here.

Francine Humboldt Whistler, Ph.D.

Francie Whistler had lobbied hard to be appointed to the Board of Inquiry and was happy that the panel would finally meet. But she did not think it appropriate that the session be preceded by a reception, as if it were no more than an academic symposium. She registered at the desk in the Coast Guard building and the warrant officer checked his list and gave her a numbered name badge with her digital photograph already embedded and directed her to the pre-meeting function room.

She spent the pre-meeting chatting with the Coast Guard radar tech over cups of scalding coffee. Vehicle Traffic Service radars had reported three different locations for the missing ferry, and each location had been farther off than the vessel could possibly have been. The Task Force might need a physicist to make sense out of that. An unexplained fact within an unexplained fact. A hole inside a hole. It wasn't the real reason she had pulled strings, but it was a true reason and it would do.

The technician didn't have the answers and knew it, which made him wiser than many others in the room that Francie could overhear. Why did people come to an *inquiry* with answers? They were supposed to bring questions. The tech had come to give testimony, and that was all. "I'm glad I don't have to make sense out of it," he confessed. "I just follow the SOPs. But I know what I saw. I ran the diagnostics afterward and every-

thing checked out. All the benchmarks were right on the money. What do you think happened?"

Francie shook her head. "It's too early to say, Tommy. We don't have all the facts yet." Everyone was still treating the event as a marine disaster. Francie wasn't so sure. She didn't think the ferry sank. She thought something else had happened, only she didn't know what.

"All three bearings showed the ferry going *away* from the radar," the young man continued. "One going back toward the dock. One toward Duwamish Head. And one toward Queen Anne Hill. That isn't possible. Do you think it was a transient malf in the computer system?"

Francie flashed on a line from an old Firesign Theater album: *How can you be in two places at once when you're not anywhere at all?* Except in this case there were three places.

When Commander Randolph arrived, everyone shuffled into the meeting room. The room was long and wide and possessed no outside windows. Francie thought this intentional. There would be reminders enough of that tragic day in the testimony. A view of the scene would have been too oppressive. Chairs stood rank-and-file in military precision. Across the front of the room ran a long table with microphones and name cards, one of which bore her name. Francie took her seat at the far left of the table, next to the federal anti-terrorism expert from Homeland.

"We'll catch the bastards who did this," the man whispered to her as she adjusted her seat. His name card announced him Carl Gratz.

Francie had heard a similar assurance earlier from the marine engineer, only *he* had hoped to catch the design flaw that caused the boat to founder. She smiled at Gratz and said, "That's why the Task Force was formed," and he nodded as if she had agreed with him.

"You're the University representative," he said after a glance at her name card. "Ms. Whistler?"

"Dr. Whistler."

Gratz grinned. "Yeah, me too." He introduced himself.

There was a pad of paper at each place, as well as a microphone, a pen, a folder, a water glass, and the other inevitable accouterments of committee meetings. Francie tapped the microphone to see if it was live and heard nothing. In the back of the room, the sound tech was playing with his board. She shrugged and picked up the pen.

Turning the pad sideways, she wrote five words across the long margin: Autopsy, Type, Source, Location, and Time. Gratz glanced at what she had written. She underlined the word *location* and wrote under it *three places at once* and *heading three directions*.

"You think the VTS radars were malfunctioning?" Gratz asked her.

"I don't know what to think. It's possible." But they had *not* been malfunctioning immediately afterward, she remembered. That's what the Coast Guard tech had told her. Under *Time*, she wrote *no radar anomalies after* and *find out specific times*.

Commander Randolph struck the gavel and two dozen cameras in the back of the room chattered like cicadas, so it was clear what image would grace the front pages and web portals tomorrow. *Investigating Committee Opens Deliberations*. She wasn't sure that these big, public au-

topsies ever solved anything. They were for assurance rather than investigation. Look, see, we are treating this tragedy with respect and importance! Posing for cameras outweighed posing questions.

Was that too cynical? The others she had spoken with during the pre-meeting seemed determined to get to the root of the matter, though they had different roots in mind; but what a committee did was often independent of what any of its members intended it to do. The moment had a logic of its own.

You're grieving, she told herself, as if she could have forgotten. She wondered whether others on the Task Force had lost a friend or relative with the ferry.

Work the numbers. Family, school chums, fishing buddies, neighbors, co-workers, merchants . . . On the average, a person knows a thousand other people. So, if an estimated thousand passengers each had a thousand acquaintances, that made a million people, which, even allowing for overlap, covered a fair chunk of metro Seattle. Chances were a third of the people in this room knew someone who had been on the ferry that morning. And the rest all knew someone who did.

Jesus, no wonder everyone looks so bleak.

"This hearing is convened," said the commander of Group Seattle, "to learn the facts of what happened last Tuesday morning on Elliott Bay." He said more, most of it to give the news reporters a lead paragraph, but Francie relaxed a little in her seat. She had been afraid the Coast Guard would push to *Get Out There and Do Something* and implement a solution before they even knew the root cause. There was still a possibility of that. The Usual Suspects were already demanding to know why the Coast Guard had not prevented the tragedy, and she had heard that one law firm was ginning up clients for a class action suit against the Washington State Ferries.

No, the first order of business was to find out what had actually happened—to measure, as she liked to say, the size and shape of the problem. Her eyes dropped to the pad where she had jotted notes of her chat with the radar tech. He would testify later in more detail, using his logs and printouts, but the gist of it was already captured. Francie thought that what the tech had told her was important, perhaps even central to the problem, that it must be something more than an instrument glitch.

The Committee heard testimony all morning: from the dispatcher at the ferry dock, from the captain and deckhands of the fishing boat that had nearly collided with the *Hyak*, from the VTS radar technician, from the pilot and co-pilot of the Coast Guard rescue chopper and the surviving frogman and crewman, from the meteorologist for the Elliott Bay region, from the chief mechanic who had worked on the *Hyak*'s last repairs. No trace had been found: no bodies or body parts, let alone survivors. How could that boat have gone down so damned fast, and with no flotsam? With not so much as an oil slick?

The reporters drifted away during the testimony. It was boring and it was for the most part technical. Francie, on the other hand, quickly filled her sheet with notes. The current encountered by the fishing boat. The wind encountered by the helicopter. Times of departure and disappear-

ance, the vessel's beam and length, her capacity, her speed, the distance from the dock to the estimated point of her disappearance, her three oddly contradictory bearings at the time of disappearance. . . .

"Excuse me," she said, and then had to repeat herself after the sound tech turned her mike on. "Tommy," she asked the VTS tech, "do your records show when these peculiar readings began and when they stopped?"

A moment passed while the tech searched his records. There had been several freighters and an oil tanker moving on the Bay at the time, and VTS tracked all of them. He found several other anomalies, starting about half an hour before the *Hyak* left dock. Francie asked for a copy of the data and the tech handed the sheets to a committee clerk for photocopying. She compared the time to the meteorologist's report of when the fog first appeared.

Very curious, Francie thought. Gratz watched quizzically as she scribbled.

"How is any of that important?" he asked.

She reminded herself that he was still chasing terrorists in his head, and not yet gauging the metes and bounds of the problem. "I don't know that any of it is," she admitted.

"Once we locate the wreckage," Gratz said, "we'll know whether they blew it up from the inside or the outside."

She looked at him. "They."

He shrugged.

She said, "No one heard an explosion."

"No one *reported* an explosion," he corrected her. "The sound may have been muffled by the fog or the horns. Or the bomb was planted down inside the hull."

Francie turned once more to her list. There were any number of explanations. If this, if that, if the other thing. . . . Allow enough *ifs* and anything was plausible. They could spin theories until the cows came home. It could have been OJ or Elvis. It could have been little green men from Alpha Centauri. If you start with the conclusion, you can always imagine a trail that reaches it, but the *simplest* explanation for not hearing an explosion was that there had not been one. The proper place to start is at the beginning. Go from what you know toward what you don't. Don't start with what you *believe*.

Later, and because the media would tolerate nothing else but, the man from Washington State Ferries read the list of names that had been confirmed so far. There would be a wall or a monument one day. That was inevitable. In the meantime, there was some balm in reading aloud the names of the lost. "John Dunning, master," the man said. "Peter Jurgowitz, mate. James O'Grady, engineer. Karen Lewis-Nowick, assistant engineer . . ." And so on through the two oilers and the eight deckhands, the two Coast Guard frogmen and the seaman who had fallen from the helicopter. Francie wondered at the order in which the names were read and decided that it was the order in which their presence on the ferry—or in the aborted rescue—had been confirmed. Cindi Comfort, she heard. Howard Mannerhein. Dale Wingate. Mitch Raftery. Paul Latimer. Agnes, Becky, and Kyle Timmer. The names ran on. The litany was numbing. When the recita-

tion reached "Donald Whistler," Francie jerked a little in her seat and the man from Homeland turned to her and said, "Your husband?"

"No, my baby brother." Well, he was twenty-five, but he'd always be her baby brother now, because he would never, ever grow any older. She could remember coming home from college and little Donny running to meet her at the door. *F'annie's home! F'annie's home!* And now, little Donny would never be there again.

Gratz gave her a handkerchief and she dabbed at her eyes. "I'm sorry," she said.

The WSF official was still reading the list and everyone listened with long faces. A couple of times, Francie saw people in the meeting room react to a name. "We kept thinking he would call," she said at last. "Mom and me and Andy. Andy is the oldest. Dad's dead. We thought, maybe Donny caught the 5:10 and he was safe in Bremerton before the *Hyak* sailed. But he would have called to tell us that, once he'd heard the news. He would have called to tell us he was safe. But it's been nearly a week now, and there's been no word."

"That's the worst part," Gratz said. "There's no closure."

"Closure." She squared the pad in front of her; moved the pen to one side. She hated that word. "After a while, you grow numb."

"I didn't know anyone on board."

Francie remembered that he was from DC. "Are you complaining?"

He shook his head. "No, just admitting that I can't know how you feel."

Maps of the bay were passed down the table. She took one and handed the last to Gratz. "I'm not sure that I know, either," she said. Key points were highlighted on the map. Pier 52. The normal ferry route. The location of the fishing boat, approximately correct because its skipper had taken a sighting on Duwamish Head only a few minutes earlier. The direction of the current they had fought. The direction of the wind-shear that had nearly brought down the 'copter. The positions of other vessels in the bay. And, marked with red crosses, the three contradictory positions for *Hyak*.

Always draw a picture of your data, her statistics professor had told her years ago. Francie took her pen and connected the crosses. *It was in there*, she thought. *Inside that triangle*. She looked through her notes on the VTS network and marked the location of the three malfunctioning radars, connecting the radars to the positions they had given.

"The three lines intersect," Gratz said. He had been watching her construction in silence. "Is that important?"

"I don't know." She used her name card as a straight-edge and projected the direction of the current that had caught the fishing boat. It, too, ran through the same locus. The back of her head began to prickle. She did the same with the wind direction. It missed, but by only a little, and the 'copter pilot had been too pre-occupied to take a more precise bearing. She added the other anomalous sightings, and each one had passed near or through that same point.

She studied her ad hoc plot with growing unease. *That was where it happened*, she thought.

Whatever it was.

Taralyn Harrison

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: JJ Brannon

What the hell is all the fuss about the Hyak? Mix some drunk captain with a little fog and incompetent government flunkies who can't even properly read radar they were trained on. It's plain buggy software compounded by human greed and stupidity at fault. The divers will find the ship once the mud settles.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Pagadan

GMAB. This is Mother Nature striking back—and about time, I'd say. Who else could create fog, currents, and winds like that. And this is just the beginning. Did you read about the chasm on the way to Disneyland, the earth quake in that Texas oil field, the giant sink hole between Orlando and Tampa?

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Velvet

JJ, did you even read the report about the radar tech? It's a real, honest-to-God anomaly. Either time travel or a portal to an alternate Earth. I'd say a tractor beam used by an entity who couldn't quite handle it.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: JJ Brannon

All right, I saw that guy with the mini-sub interviewed on the 6 o'clock news. I admit those videos show no ferry down there in the mud. So I think it was Release 1.0 of some quantum-nanobyte experiment. Some of that crap probably got loose and the ferry fell apart in a zillion pieces and washed away. That's where all the steam came from, too.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: FIJAGDH

A buddy of mine out west says the Taos, NM, hum changed frequency the same day they lost that ferry. Which proves my theory about the Taos hum being part of some secret government experimentation with found/donated alien technology.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: IrishBet

JJ, have you forgotten the USS Eldridge? Teleportation could account for the anomalies at the time of reappearance. I've never believed they gave up that line of inquiry. SciAm ran an article about the practical possibilities of teleportation back in 1997. I'm betting a shiny new quarter the ferry will be back.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Tee-Ell

Dont you people listen to yourselves? It's not a game!! I lost my boy on that boat. Maybe if you had, youd look at things different.

Taralyn

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Les OneGuy

The only scientific fact that explains this is a teleportation experiment by the North Koreans, what else could they be doing with those reactors. It's people like you who hinder the advance of civilization with your moralistic superstitions, your sexual hangups, and your inability to see that all religions are a fraud based on the big people loading it over the regular ones. This will probably trigger a world-wide war ending in nuclear conflagration, but I feel that in the end it will work out for the better and bring humanity to the stars, or at least those of us who can see it and prepare for it.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Kwakiutl1968

Have you ever been whale watching? Have you ever stood on deck and been fixed by those big, penetrating, accusing eyes? Whales know who we are, and what we've been doing to their kind for a thousand years. I don't know what they did to the Hyak, and I don't know how they did it, but the Hyak incident is only the beginning. The whales have finally decided to fight back.

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Tee-Ell

I dont know nothing bout no teleportation or time travel or althornate earths whatever that is. But I do know bout my son, Tiron. Maybe it mean something to you people, or maybe it dont. You think people just words on a screen cause you never ever see each other. But here I am doing the same, like my daughter showed me how, so maybe this is just something I need to do and if anyone read it or not, it dont really matter. So let me make the words flesh.

Tiron he was a fine boy. Big, like he could rest his chin on top my hed and long arms. Had to be long to rap all the way round his mama. Only twenny last march, but he was working hard and trying to save up money to maybe go to the communtty college next year. He was always study hard in school. He wasnt smart like some, but worked at it way his daddy did. He use to tell me things like I never heard of before, all about enjins and that. He had a book about how stuff worked and he'd tell me about it ever chance he got. And sometimes he take apart stuff like my toaster or the telephone just to see you know what was inside? You should of seen his eyes when he talked mashines. He wanted to get one of those soshit

degrees. Nobody in our famly ever got no degrees, so we was real proud of him for trying. I know his daddy would of been. His daddy was kilt in the Stan, and Tiron, he missed him something bad. He never cried much. You dont want to be a boy cries much in this naborhood. But he always goes how he wants to invent something and name it after his daddy.

Well he use to work little jobs at repair stores and stuff, like places where he got to play with mashines. And then last spring his name finly come up at the union hall and he got a job as oiler on the ferry boats. Oh he was so proud! He was so proud. He come home real greasy from those rides. Everbody like him and he like everbody on the boats. He was reel happy down there with the enjins and things.

It was just before it happen that Tiron told me he want to be a navel architek which is all about building boats. I didnt understand half what he said and I probly didnt spell it right. I know I dont spell so good. When I was a kid I didnt have the same chances as Tiron so I never mounted to much, tho I kept myself clean and honest even when it was hard. Tiron, he could of been somebody.

Whats hardest is that he wasnt supposed to be on Hyak that day but he traded with a friend who had to go see a doctor. That Keith is so twist-ed up over it. Half of hims sorry it was my Tiron went in his place, but the other half is happy it wasnt him. I dont hold it against him tho. Hes a nice boy and was good friend to Tiron.

Tiron he lef the house that day just like always and took his lunch with him and he kiss me on the cheek and say he wants my pulled pork for supper. Thats what I was cooking when I hear the news. Pulled pork. Oh he did favor that some.

You never know when you say good-bye for the last time. You never ever know that. It seem just like ever other time, and later you wish youd of said something more or did something more but you dint

Was hard for me he called away like that so young. I dont know why the Lord wanted him but I guess he must got a reason. I just wisht he explain it to me, cause I dont want to think it just bad luck he be gone.

Taralyn

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: Come2Reven

I read an expose that the ship in question wasn't actually the U.S.S. El-dridge docked in Philadelphia, but the U.S.S. Philadelphia docked in El-dridge. No wonder the facts have been so hard to uncover, huh?

Subject: Re: The Disappearance.

From: DANNISGRL

Ch 7 is going to run a special with the guy who talks to dead people. It's about time science was brought in to solve the case!

William J. Timmer, Ph.D.

Abstract: It will be shown that the well-known disappearance of *MV Hyak* is the result of a singularity in the dynamic field equations for rotating magnetic fields. The locus for this singularity will be shown to be unstable in the sense of Poincare and to be subject to aperiodic shifts in its locus due to endogenous factors. These shifts will be conceptualized by means of Thomian catastrophe surfaces.

Text: It is well known that the state of a dynamic system acting under a potential will move toward the nearest equilibrium point in its state space in such a way as to minimize the value of the potential function. The set of all such equilibria comprises a manifold over the parameter space known as the "attractor." If the manifold is "folded" or "pleated," loci exist in parameter space possessing two or more distinct equilibria. A system entering such a *bifurcation set* while at one equilibrium will snap to the other should it leave the set at the opposite boundary. From the reference frame of the original state, the object will appear to accelerate rapidly in a direction orthogonal to the sheet. Rene Thom [7] called this a catastrophe, although he did not mean a catastrophe in the colloquial sense, such as the loss of one's wife and children, but simply a sudden change from one equilibrium state to another.

The anomalous radar fixes in the case of the Seattle Event, each of which showed the ferry accelerating directly away from it, provide a good empirical fit to the model. The fit is further substantiated by anecdotal evidences; namely, the dopplering of the boat's horn and the red-shifted light reported by eyewitnesses. Clearly, the vessel accelerated along a dimension orthogonal to normal 3-space. It is suggested that the Elliott Bay Anomaly marks the edge of a higher dimension bifurcation set in space-time. One might call this colloquially a "drain-hole."

That a singularity must exist in certain dynamic systems is well known, but the locus of the singularity may be subject to random fluctuations. A comparison is made to the familiar topological problem of covering a billiard ball with hair. Such a cover must leave a gap, for example the "bald spot" that forms when men comb their hair flat. If the hair is combed differently, the "bald spot" will appear in a different position.

An analogous process can be applied to higher dimensional dynamic manifolds. While locally smooth, they cannot be globally smooth. Very little in life is globally smooth. Thom's Classification Theorem states that only seven stable catastrophes can arise from variations in the parameter space. These qualitatively distinct discontinuities arise from a combination of technical and geometric considerations involving the regions of parameter space where the catastrophes happen. It is suggested that the Elliott Bay Anomaly is of this nature. Anecdotal data suggests a former locus near the island of Bermuda. A hole being an absence (or is it the absence that leaves the hole?), it does not physically move; but a change induced on the manifold that closes a hole will inevitably cause another to open elsewhere. A conservation law is suspected. This will require additional research.

We pause here and consider marriage as a dynamic system operating under a potential. It, too, is manifold and it is hypothesized that a wrinkle must necessarily exist in it, and that if one difficulty is resolved, another must inevitably take its place. A suitable stabilizing strategy might then be the introduction of a permanent difficulty. The truly destructive strategy is the expectation that there ought to be none.

However, the existence of these local catastrophes, which we may term "spats," depends on a combination of technical and geometric considerations involving the regions of the marital parameter space where the catastrophes happen. A million variables affect the emergence of form within the envelope of the marriage, all working to minimize its potential. These variables include genes, chemicals, environmental conditions, space, and time. At any given time, only one or two are likely to change in a discontinuous manner, arguing that while the phenomenon is global, the precise shape of the catastrophe may depend on local conditions. So may a hitherto-faithful spouse suddenly engage in a destructive affair for reasons of long, if obscure standing; or a sweet young boy alter into a surly adolescent. This being the case, the passage of time (and, with it, the alteration of the local conditions that precipitated the discontinuity) may rectify the anomaly.

Yet, to analyze the system in such dispassionate terms may earn the sobriquet of a "passionless little prick" lacking "any semblance of human feelings." Such a judgment would be mistaken, as it refers only to the expression of, and not the impression of, passion. The mousiest man may seethe with murderous rage; an undemonstrative man, with tender love. When once it is said, "I love you," no additional information is transmitted by endless repetitions. Logic teaches us that. Better to spend words on increasing the information content of the system, such as by noting that "we are out of bread" or "the car needs washing." Because a thought has not been spoken, it would be illogical to conclude that it has not been thought. Would the household be not short of bread were it unmentioned? Likewise, would a spouse be short of love were it not mentioned? The analogy is precise; the parallel, instructive. But the results have proven upon inspection wholly divergent, suggesting the applicability of chaos theory.

And now they are gone, Becky and little Kyle and Agnes alike, fallen into a hole that has no bottom, creating a similar hole in the author's life. Would it have made any difference if the author had said "I love you" at the pier-side? Would they be less completely gone? Perhaps. Perhaps she would have turned back at the words, as to a strange attractor, and stepped off the gangplank and into my arms as she once did when she and I and all the world were younger.

But time is the one asymmetric parameter governing the state space. Which is just another way of saying that there is "no turning back the clock."

Unless there is something on the other fold. It would be pleasant to believe that those who have "passed over" to the other sheet have found a new life there, but science tells us nothing, and nothing is little comfort.

God damn this paper and this conference.

* * *

The author has found the preparation of this paper difficult. Select all. Delete.

Does that not sum up the entire phenomenon of the Disappearance?
"Select all. Delete."

Axel Moller

Scene: the living room of a small three room apartment in downtown Seattle. A hexagonal table covered by a green felt is situated in the center of the room but with only five chairs spaced around it. Four men sit at the table, one of them stacking poker chips of assorted colors. Behind them, the window looks out on tall, anonymous buildings, but in the gap between two of them lies a slice of Elliott Bay. It is dusk, just going on to evening.

Enter Axel Moller.

Axel: I brought the beer. I hope you have the cards. (*Places six-pack on the table. Removes jacket and tosses it on the nearby sofa.*)

Luis: Long as you brought money and an inclination to lose.

Axel: In your dreams, Luis. (*Sits.*) Hey, Beef, Gordo, Chen, how're they hanging?

Various hand-slaps and exclamations of masculine greetings.

Gordo: (*Gathers cards into deck, squares deck, begins to shuffle*) Seven card stud. Ante up, boys.

They throw chips into the pot and Gordo deals the cards.

Gordo: We gotta jack showin.' Your bet, Chen.

Chen: (*Throws in another chip*) Five.

Beef: Sure you can afford it? (*The others match the bet and Gordo deals the next round.*)

Gordo: Hey, Axe, you plan on drinkin' all that yourself?

(*Axel breaks open the six-pack and hands out the cans. Then he sits staring dumbly at the sixth can, which he has just placed at the empty sixth side of the hexagon.*)

Axel: Shit. Oh, shit. (*He turns away from the table.*) Damn.

(*The others look at Axel, at the can, at the empty space, at each other. Axel goes to the window and leans his arm against the sash, staring out toward Elliott Bay. He rests his head upon his arm.*)

Life's a bitch.

Beef: And then you . . . (*He shuts up abruptly.*)

Axel: (*Without turning*) You think you get over it, but you don't, really. You forget for one little second, and some old habit pops up and reminds you.

Gordo: Paul was our friend, too.

Axel: Yeah. Yeah, I know.

Beef: (*Lifts his beer can in salute*) Absent friends. (*No one joins the toast. Beef shrugs and drinks alone.*)

Axel: I saw the fog come in yesterday. Another one of those "Bermuda" fogs.

Chen: (*Shakes head*) Bermuda Fog. In Seattle harbor.

Axel: And there's always some moron, he rows out or he swims out into it because he wants to visit another plane of existence.

Gordo: It's a helluva thing, all right. People got no sense.

Luis: No one ever come back and said where the "drainhole" goes—

Chen: If that's what it is.

Luis: —so why are they so freaking sure they want to go there?

Axel: (*With quiet vehemence*) What difference does it make what it is or where it goes or even if it "goes" anywhere at all? Paul's gone. They're all gone. And no one thinks they're ever coming back.

Beef: 'Cept that loony-kazoony over in Bremerton, goes down to the dock every morning. Hey, remember how Paulie used to rig the big arc lamps when we worked night crew. And he'd aim them so's any gal walking past the site, the light would shine right through their dresses and you could see 'em all like in silhouette? (*Laughs*)

Luis: He was a funny guy.

Beef: Sometimes what was under those dresses shouldn'ta been seen. Geez. Supersize those fries. That's why Paulie always was working out at the gym, pumping iron and firming up the old pecs.

Chen: Hey, Ax, that's where you met Paul, wasn't it? Down at the gym.

Axel: (*Turning from the window*) About a year ago. I was in physical therapy, for my ankle. We used to chat in the cardio room when we had treadmills side by side.

Beef: Bet he raced you. That's the kinda guy he was. Real competitive. Bet he cranked up the revs on that treadmill to see if you could keep it up.

Axel: (*Looks out window once more*) Yeah. He always wanted to see if I could keep it up.

Gordo: Hey, c'mon. St. Paul was the guy wrote all those letters. Paulie was a stand-up guy, but he wasn't Mr. Perfect. Blanche said—

Chen: Poor Blanche! I wonder if she's gotten over it yet.

Gordo: She sort of noticed that none of you guys come round any more.

Beef: (*Defensively*) Well, she wasn't the one playing cards, was she?

Axel: (*From window, but without turning*) You see her lately, Gordo?

Gordo: (*Sips from can, puts it down*) Yeah. Lately.

Beef: Comfortin' the ol' widow, Gordo? (*Winks to others; Chen turns away.*)

Luis: Look, can we play cards?

Chen: Hey, remember when our guys played Axel's team in the softball league and Paul—

Beef: Hey, Axel, you warehouse guys are pussies! You know what we do in construction?

Luis: Yeah, we make big erections. You tell that joke every time, Beef, and it wasn't funny after the first thirty-two times.

Axel: (*Turns a little toward Luis and smiles faintly*) Paul was good at that.

Luis: Axel, sit your ass down so I can like deal this hand?

Axel: You think it's really a drainhole like they say? (*He lingers by the window gazing out.*)

Beef: No, it's an asshole. That's why everyone on that boat wound up feeling like shit.

(Axel takes two steps and grabs Beef by the shirtfront and yanks him to his feet. His biceps bulge and tremble under his tight-fitting shirt. He holds Beef for a moment as if he will shake him to pieces. The others look on with varying degrees of shock and surprise. Finally Luis and Chen stand and separate the two. Beef sinks back to his seat; Axel returns to his vigil by the window.)

Chen: Like, who says it's a drainhole? I've heard a dozen theories. It's a wormhole to somewhere else in the universe. Or it's a doorway to another dimension—

Luis: That's the Twilight Zone, Chen. What the hell difference does it make? Look, the best way we can honor Paulie's memory is to drink a toast and play a hand. And maybe take up a collection for Blanche. Gordo's right. The girls have as much fun as us at the summer picnics and stuff. Why should Blanche be out of it now just because Paulie's dead?

Gordo: Don't bother. She's not exactly broke up about it.

Luis: Now that's a helluva thing to say.

Gordo: (*Shrugs*) Paulie and Blanche hadn't been in the sack together for a long time.

Chen: What, they were having a fight and. . . ?

Gordo: No, it was the other way 'round. She was upset because he *wasn't* coming through in the husband department. So she figured he had a little something on the side and that pissed her off.

Luis: Paulie?

Beef: Well, he was always checking out the girls. You know. "Hey, get a load of that set." Maybe he just wanted a closer look.

Axel: (*To Gordo*) She say who Paulie was seeing?

Gordo: Nah. Blanche figured he was catting around until about a year or so ago, then he found someone steady. She didn't mind it *too* much when she thought he was playing the field, but she hated the idea that there was someone else special in his life. Some poker nights he wouldn't come home until way after the game broke up.

Axel: (*Slowly*) Maybe he thought he'd picked up a disease and didn't want to give it to her, and that's why he stopped sleeping with her.

Gordo: And so he's still St. Paulie? Excuse me if I quit the church. Blanche is a special lady and he treated her like she didn't even exist.

Beef: (*After a pause*) You seem to know a lot about how Blanche feels.

Gordo: (*Throws cards down on table*)

Luis: Christ. . . ! You're porkin' Paulie's widow, aren't you?

Chen: She's not exactly his wife any more, Luis.

Gordo: And not for a long time, even before he died.

Chen: (*To Gordo*) You mean . . . Before? Well, shit!

Gordo: What's sauce for the gander is sauce for the goose, isn't it? He wasn't having any of her, and neither me or her saw any reason to let it go to waste.

Luis: (*Drops his cards, too*) I don't feel like playin' no more.

Chen: Me neither. Jesus, Gordo. He was our pal. You don't go doing that to your buddy.

Gordo: How was I hurting him? If Paulie didn't want no one in bed with Blanche, he shoulda stayed there himself, 'stead o' running around trying

to prove what a man's man he was. I didn't take a damn thing from him that he hadn't already tossed aside. Aren't I right, Axel?

Axel: (*By window, wipes cheek with sleeve, turns to face group*) Yeah. That's right. He was a man's man.

The Adventure Club

There were seven of them and they all lived in the neighborhood except for Jimmy, so it was never any problem to get together after school. They usually met in Denny's basement because that was where they kept the club's flag and Denny's dad had helped set up a laboratory. They had racks of chemicals that they used to experiment with different rocket fuels, and an electrical bench where they worked on ignition systems. One time they had blown all the fuses in the house and Denny's dad had made them promise not to test a circuit until they had shown him the schematics and he had inspected their work. Mr. Collingwood worked at Boeing and knew all sorts of stuff about electronics.

But developing a rocket ship had taken a back seat to the Seattle Drainhole. They even held some club meetings down near the old ferry dock because they hoped to see the hole open up, which would have been seriously cool.

"But there's no periodicity to it," the twins said, after Denny had called the meeting to order and they were all sitting around the old table in the basement with cans of pop and a big bag of chips. Frank and Harry were identical twins, and no one was ever sure which one was talking. SciAm and the other science mags had reported the lack of periodicity, but the club's rule was never to trust authority. Frank (unless it had been Harry) had compiled a list of all confirmed events, starting with the initial tragedy. And Harry (unless it had been Frank) had analyzed the time series.

"It's a chaotic system," said Jimmy. "I knew it."

"Everybody knows it, dummy," said Red. "That Timmer guy proved it. It was in *Science News*."

"Besides," Denny said, "you can have irregular time series without chaos. Look at eclipses."

"Solar system is chaotic," said the twins. "Poincare proved it."

"Ah, screw you."

"Up yours."

"S'what are we gonna do about it?" Red asked. The others all looked at him.

"I dunno, Red," Jimmy said, scratching his head. "Get a really big freakin' cork?"

Red's face illustrated his nickname. "Naw, I mean those people on the boat. Somebody's gotta get them outta the hole."

"You crazy, dude?" said Denny. "They're croakers, for sure. If the singularity didn't crush them, they've run out of food and water by now."

"Hey!" said Jimmy, with a nod toward Red. "Watch your mouth."

"Aw, shit, Red," the club president said. "You know I didn't mean nothing by it."

Red wiped his eye, which had gotten something in it. "I can deal with it."

"Your brother was a really neat guy," Denny insisted.

"I know that!" said Red. "But who's doing squat to rescue him?"

The club fell silent as each contemplated how a rescue might be achieved through a singularity. Finally, one of the twins broke the silence.

"What if it isn't? A singularity, I mean. Frank and I lurk on a physics usenet newsgroup out in dot-uni. It's the real thing, not dot-com crap. Anyhow, this one physicist named Janatpour, he said that physics ought to make sense, and singularities were just artifacts of the math, not real things."

"Oh, *that's* convincing," said Jimmy.

"No, he pointed out that sunspots are caused by differential rotation of the sun. The northern and southern hemispheres rotate at different speeds, and that sets up eddies in the electromagnetic field."

"You might have noticed," Jimmy pointed out, "that the drainhole is here on Terra, not on Sol."

"Sure," said Harry. "But Terra has a molten core. What if *that* has differential rotation? That could put twists into Terra's electromagnetic field, too."

"Umm," said Denny. "You saying the Drainhole is a *sunspot*?"

"Earthspot, dummy," said Red, who had recovered his composure.

"Well," said Frank, taking the handoff from his brother, "if Terra was a ball of plasma, it would be. But it's the same *kind* of thing. At least this Janatpour guy says so, and Timmer and Whistler both think he might be on to something."

"Those two are too emotionally involved," said Denny. "You need complete detachment to do science."

Red leaned forward and the card table rocked a little from the weight. "So, if the drainhole is a vortex, not a singularity. . . ."

". . . it's gotta open up somewhere else. Not on Terra, or we woulda heard something. But *somewhere*."

Visions of gateways, of alternate universes, of time portals danced in their heads. Denny's dad came to the head of the cellar stairs. "What are you kids up to?" he called.

A chorus of "Nothing," "Just talk," "We're cool, Dad," and "We're gonna rescue the Ferry People."

"Okay," Mr. Young replied. "Just don't run any experiments without my okay."

Another chorus of "okay" and then they all turned to Red.

"Whaddaya mean we're gonna rescue the people on the ferry?"

If the Adventure Club had owned a submersible, they might have sent it into the drainhole. But their club treasury, Jimmy reported, could not take the hit. So they did the next best thing.

"If we can just get a message back from them," Red insisted, "the grownups would get off their butts and *do* something." He meant a message back from his brother Steve, but he didn't say that. The others, dazzled by the headlines they could read afterward, set themselves to planning.

First, they needed a lot of rope. And a container of some sort for the

message. They needed a boat so they could get close enough to the drain-hole when it opened to throw the container into it, and to give them a base to haul it back out again. That was conceptual engineering.

Details. They bought a lockbox with a combination lock on it so it wouldn't open up accidentally during transit. Red wrote a message to put inside, and they added extra paper and pens so the Ferry People could write an answer. Denny painted the combination for the lock on the outside—they left it at 0-0-0—so they could open it up at the other end.

How much rope would they need? How deep was the hole? "Deep" is the wrong word," Jimmy said. "The vortex goes along Kaluza-Klein dimensions, not up or down or nothing." They bought as much clothesline as the treasury could afford, nearly a thousand feet, and coiled it around a garden hose windlass so they could crank it back out. Denny was a Boy Scout, so he tied the ends of the different coils together with knots guaranteed not to come loose.

Jimmy's folks had money and had a big pond in their backyard in the suburbs. The club set up a target on the pond and practiced throwing the rope, using a weight tied to the end so they wouldn't damage the box. Jimmy's mom saw them and asked what they were up to and they all chorused, "Target practice," and she shook her head and went back inside. Denny and Red and Frank were most accurate, so they got the job of actually making the throw. They practiced winding the rope back in, too.

The twins borrowed their dad's fishing boat and paddled it into the bay one night and hid it under the pilings for Alaskan Way. Since the harbor was shut down, there was little traffic on the Bay or along the shore, but they did it in the evening and didn't start the outboard. They pretended they were infiltrating an enemy coast.

The next evening, Denny and Red took the windlass down and screwed it to one of the boat's seats.

After that, it was a matter of waiting.

Since no one knew when the vortex would open, the club worked out a watch schedule. School hours were out, as was dinner time, and Jimmy could not always come into the city. They decided to have always two sentries in the boat, one of them to throw, the other to work the windlass.

In practice, they couldn't keep the schedule. There were unexpected chores at home, or school assignments. On weekends, the entire club would hang out near the pier, with binoculars and notebooks, and take turns in the boat. Once, some fishermen saw them climbing down to the water-level and warned them that it was dangerous "because of the Drainhole."

"As if we didn't know about it," Denny commented afterward.

The hole opened up twice while they were in school and one other time during breakfast. They could hear the hooting of the klaxon all over the city and, like everyone else, they stopped what they were doing, and didn't even speak until the all-clear sounded.

Finally, it happened while they were on watch.

It was a weekend and Red and Denny were in the boat that hour. Jimmy and the twins were above, on Alaskan Way, pretending that they

knew what girls were all about. There were only a handful of pedestrians about on miscellaneous mid-day missions. Jimmy had just said that maybe they should give up the vigils, when the hooting klaxon gave them a jump and they turned and crowded the guard rail.

"Hot spit," said Harry. "There it is!"

It was nothing more than a fog bank, but the siren was triggered by the VTS radar net, so they knew this was the real thing. The radars were seeing double again.

"It's like a lens," Frank said, pointing. "If we could see *through* the fog like radar, everything in line with the vortex would look farther away."

"There they go," said Harry.

The motorboat's outboard had started up and the craft putted out from under the pilings and toward the fog. Red was at the engine and Denny, in the bow, already had the rope coiled for throwing.

"Hope he doesn't get too close," Jimmy said, and Frank looked at him.

"They aren't stupid." He raised his binoculars and watched his chums' progress.

Red put the boat just at the edge of the fog and turned it broadside. Denny stood up and whirled the rope around his head. The message box on the end flashed every time it caught the sun.

A Coast Guard power boat sped across the Bay, giving the fog a wide berth. "Get off the water!" a voice boomed at the messengers. "These waters are dangerous!"

Denny let fly and the box tumbled into the fog. The rope drifted after it, then became taut and began to unreel from the windlass.

The idlers who had been walking along Alaskan Way had come to the rail, drawn by the novelty. "What the hell are those kids up to?" Frank heard someone ask.

"They're trying to send a message to the ferry," he told the man, with a mix of defensiveness and pride. Harry piped his agreement. Jimmy, on the other hand, remained silent and stepped away from the twins.

The windlass ran out to the end. The rope jerked and the boat began to drift into the fog.

"Oh, shit!" said Harry from the esplanade.

Denny said later that the same thought crossed his mind. Red had kept the motor running "to maintain station," but he was working the windlass. Denny leapt past him to seize the outboard's handle and turn them away from the vortex. He revved the motor and the boat moved slowly away from the fog, as if dragging an enormous anchor. Then it slowed to a stop and began moving backward.

"I can't wind it in!" Red cried from the windlass. "It's like the box got really, really heavy."

"Cut it loose, cut it loose!" Denny's pants were wet and he hoped everyone would think it was from the water. He reached overboard to splash water on himself and felt a really strong current. The vortex was sucking in water and air and—pretty soon—him and Red. Overhead, the twisting magnetic fields were confusing the birds' directional senses and they were circling endlessly around the drainhole.

Then the whole windlass tore loose from the seat where they had screwed it in. It whipped overboard, hit the water, and skipped twice before it slithered at the end of the rope into the fog.

Red went over with it.

"He got tangled in the rope," Denny told the twins while they waited for their parents to come get them from Coast Guard custody. "He was gone before I knew it. There was nothing I coulda done, guys." They were all crying and snuffling, sucked down by reality from their science fantasy, no less than Red had been sucked in by the vortex.

"He'll be with Steve now," Harry said. "He loved his brother."

"Yeah," said Frank, fingering his binoculars. "Denny, I was watching. Red didn't get tangled in the rope. He held on to it and didn't let go."

Jennifer Doonerbeck

Early morning, chilly, going on toward autumn. A few fishing boats are tied up to the wharves along Alaskan Way, and the waves slap against hulls, pilings, palisades. Gulls laugh. A distant motorboat near the marina buzzes like a lawnmower. The lighting is indirect; a reluctant sun lingers behind the mountains.

Two joggers appear, side by side, their running shoes clapping nearly in time. Strangers, they have met by chance and have fallen in together on their run, and now they pace each other. An older man walking briskly past them in the other direction wonders if they are sisters. They are much of a type, similar in build and age and dress; young, but past the first rush of it; firm muscles and dirty-straw hair tied back with elastic sweat bands; braving the chill in gym shorts and halter tops. The fishermen breaking fast in a dockside café watch in frank admiration.

The breeze had been off the Bay, cool and with the bite of salt in it. Now it shifts, and a land breeze whispers out over the water. Flags snap and turn. A windsock at the end of one of the docks swings about. Gulls shear off with loud complaint. The breakfasting fishermen, swinging like windsocks themselves, shift their gaze toward the Bay. The joggers halt and stand with chests heaving and with sweat dripping off their brows. One—she is by a fraction the taller of the two—rests a hand on a piling. They, too, study the Bay.

For a moment, an anxious silence: The scene is frozen. The fishermen hold their coffee mugs or silverware half-raised. The joggers gaze into the chuckling water to judge the run of the waves. Even the gulls coast on the soft winds with unmoving wings.

But . . . no siren wails, and everyone relaxes, as if they had been suspended on strings now suddenly cut. Fishermen and waitresses chatter, and china and silverware clink. The cook hollers something from the back and the men laugh. The joggers bend into their cooling-down stretches, as if they have only just now remembered to do them.

The three fishermen sitting near the front of the café glance toward the

empty piers that lend Alaskan Way its abandoned look. The ferries dock out past Alki Point these days and most commercial shipping and recreational boating put in elsewhere as well. The bearded man, the middle of the three, remembers how he and Pete Jurgowitz, the *Hyak's* mate, used to sail the bay together as kids, but the thought is only reflex, the tear of memory remains unstarted, and he does not speak of it to his friends.

On his right sits a solid young man with hard muscles. He wishes that the drainhole would at least open and close on a regular schedule—"like that geyser thing out in Yellowstone." The previous week it had not opened at all, but the week before that it had stayed open for several days, disturbing currents and winds all the way out into the Sound. "No one knew jack when *Hyak* happened," he says, "but now with the buoys marking the place an' the radars watching for that 'pair of slacks' . . ."

"Parallax," says the bearded man, who watches the Discovery channel. "... Anyone gets sucked in now," the younger man insists, "they *wanna* get sucked in, or they're just plain stupid."

The third man's attention has been drawn back to the joggers, whose lithe and graceful motions he greatly admires. He asks the waitress the name of the woman in the tan shorts, but the waitress, suspecting carnal thoughts on his part, pretends ignorance. But she herself spares a glance at the younger woman and remembers when she too possessed such a body.

The woman in tan is Jennifer Doonerbeck, a graduate student at the University. She is not conventionally pretty, but it's all in the presentation. She gives no thought to men's interest when she dresses, and it is this artlessness that becomes the greater art. The color of her jogging outfit is very nearly the tone of her suntan, and the third fisherman has discovered that when he squints his eyes a little she seems to be naked.

"Why are those men over there squinting like that?" Jennifer asks her companion.

The taller woman unbends from her stretches and glances at the café. "Sailors all get that look about them. The chop flashes from the sunlight, so they squint to cut down the glare." The explanation satisfies both the teller and the told, and the fishermen would have agreed red-faced had they overheard. It is not, in any event, a matter of great moment. Jennifer finds her companion staring out once more silently at the Bay and asks who she once knew.

It is not a question that needs an explanation. It seems as if all Seattle is known by who they once knew. Hello, glad to meet you, who did *you* know on the *Hyak*? Jennifer has heard of strangers pretending to such acquaintances, as if they *want* to have been touched by the tragedy, and feel a loss at having had no loss. It strikes her as a bit of theft to steal a bereavement to which they are not entitled.

The taller woman, whose name is Mack of all unlikely things—it is short for Mackenzie, and that is bad enough—admits to losing a colleague *and* a neighbor's boy, thus pulling rank on Jennifer, who has lost only a cousin.

"Do you think we're safe here?" Jennifer is watching the ring of buoys that delimit the danger zone. They are welded together by a rigid framework and are anchored to the floor of the bay so that they will not be

drawn into the drainhole when it opens. A chain-link fence has been installed to prevent future tragedies like that high-school science club.

Mack is not sure, but thinks there is some reason why the anomaly can form only over water. Something to do with fluid motion, of which her jogging had been an example. "It used to be the Bermuda Triangle, you know," she says, repeating a tidbit of folk wisdom fast becoming consensual reality.

Jennifer has heard about the Bermuda connection, but she does not understand how a hole could cross the whole country without creating an Arkansas Triangle or an Wyoming Triangle or whatever along its path. Or did it travel *through* the Earth like a tunneling mole?

"My cousin grew up on a farm out near Spokane," Jennifer says, and Mack listens politely because that is what one does when a chance companion mentions her *Hyak* loss. "She was nice and we had fun when my folks took me out there in the summer, but I always thought she was like, you know, a dork?" *Nil nisi bonum*, the Romans had once said, but they hadn't had cousins from Spokane. "When she grew up and moved here to the city, she was always calling me and I was always making excuses and blowing her off, so I'm sorry now I was so rude to her."

Mack thinks that the *Hyak* has been the cause of more confessions than a hundred priests and a tent revival, but she is not about to withhold absolution. A native of Manhattan driven by ambition to abide a while in the Northwest, she does not tell Jennifer that from her point of view Seattle and Spokane are equally hick, and "the City" refers to one City alone on all the earth. "You didn't have an obligation to her," she tells the other woman.

"No," Jennifer says, "but I sorta wish I'd had." And that remark, more than anything Jennifer has said up till now, strikes Mack in the heart.

The fishermen have left the café and walk toward the pier where their boat is one of the few still mooring there. One calls a polite greeting and the joggers wave back. Jennifer notices the tight buns one of them boasts. Mack pays them no attention.

Mack's colleague had not been especially close to her, not even in the hypothetical way that Jennifer's cousin might have been. His office had been a few doors from hers, high up in one of Seattle's tallest buildings. They had worked together on a couple of projects and he had flirted with her a few times, but the dalliance had offered her no career advantage and she had not responded. The neighbor's boy, Dale, was another matter. He had been kind of sweet—young enough for a puppy-love crush on the "neighbor lady," and just old enough to make it flattering. His mother was a homebody, but seeing afterward how the woman had been emptied entirely of life, Mack wondered whether she herself, had she been a breeder, could have produced a boy half so engaging as Dale. But if she knew her own strengths, Mack knew her own weaknesses, too; and "mother" had never been her *métier*. Now she wondered whether she was diminished in some manner because she could never suffer a loss so keen as her neighbor had.

It was a day for hypotheticals. Cousins hypothetically helped. Children hypothetically born. Joggers hypothetically stripped naked. Vortexes hy-

pothetically forming over land. In theory, that last would never happen. But in theory, Mack could still run after the three fishermen and have them all, each and severally, upon their coiled nets. It would not have been the most comfortable experience, fishnets being what they are, and the fishermen would have known some disappointment that it had not been Jennifer to jump their bones. Still, it shows the limits of theory, because it just wasn't going to happen. A drainhole over dry land would remain theoretically impossible right up until the moment it happened. Then the brainiacs would punch some buttons on their computers and come up with a new theory.

ATN *Puget Sound* motors out from Harbor Island, where the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has built its new facilities. The Vortex is neither oceanic nor atmospheric, but NOAA has somehow inherited ownership. The barge, borrowed from the Coast Guard, carries on it a vehicle a little like the Mars Rovers. Mack and Jennifer point it out to each other and speculate on its purpose.

A woman standing on the barge sees them and waves. The vehicle is called the *Odysseus* and the plan is to place it in the water and allow the Vortex, when it next opens, to suck it through to the Other Side while it sends data back through a miles-long umbilical of the lightest and strongest fullerene-tube optical cable. Every scientist in the world had begged a space on the platform for an instrument or experiment. Had all requests been granted, *Odysseus* would have shamed the *Queen Mary II*.

But with no clear notion of the environment awaiting it, the instrument package has been designed to roll, fly, and float, to withstand vacuum and pressure and heat and cold and heavy accelerations and hard radiation and, like any device manufactured to such contradictory specifications, it does none of these things well. Dr. Whistler—she is the woman standing on the barge—does not expect *Odysseus* to survive for long. She does not know if the umbilical will be long enough to reach the Other Side. She is not even sure that there *is* an Other Side. But she hopes for *something*, for a reading, for even a single picture. She is not so optimistic as to expect an answer, but it is her fondest dream to learn that there *is* an answer.

The diesels on a fishing boat power up, belching a cloud of black smoke, and the buff young man with the tight buns casts off. The boat gives wide berth to the buoys marking the locus of the Vortex. It isn't open, but there is no telling when it might. Jennifer recognizes them and waves, jumping up and down with a vivacity that five years of corporate ladder-climbing has sucked from the heart of her companion. The fishing boat toots its horn for Jennifer, but Mack is still gazing into the depths of the Bay, thinking about the boy, Dale.

"Dawn was theirs," she quotes, "and sunset and the colours of the earth."

Jennifer turns and says, Hunh? She was an English major, but does not recognize the line.

*These hearts were woven of human joys and care,
Washed marvelously with sorrow, swift to mirth.
The years had given them kindness. Dawn was theirs,
And sunset and the colours of the earth. ○*

Pamela Sargent is a past winner of the Locus Award and the winner of a Nebula for the novelette, "Danny Goes to Mars" (*Asimov's*, October 1992). Pam has also been a finalist for the Hugo and Theodore Sturgeon Awards. Her most recent publications include the short fiction collection *Thumbprints* (Golden Gryphon, 2004) and the anthology *Conqueror Fantastic* (DAW, 2004). She is now at work on a young adult novel for Tor Books. The author's last story for us, "Amphibians," appeared in our June 1995 issue. After *far* too long an absence, she returns to our pages to examine the motivation of a certain big ape and to look into what happened . . .

AFTER I STOPPED SCREAMING

Pamela Sargent

The blonde in the big ape's hand. Long before you had Rita Hayworth on that bed in a negligée or Marilyn standing over that grate with her skirt billowing up, there were all those pictures and posters and billboards of me, the blonde in the big ape's hand.

You asked me why I became so reclusive, why I stayed out of the lime-light for so long. Well, I really wasn't that much of a recluse when I was younger, I did have my friends and activities, and if you think I'm a recluse now, all I can say is that when you get past ninety, you pretty much have to keep closer to home. In my younger days, I also preferred to be around people I knew pretty well, people who were pals and wouldn't ask me all the usual questions. I would have gotten out and about a lot more if I just could have counted on strangers not to start asking me for the "real" story.

You know what I mean. Frankly, it was a relief when almost everybody seemed to forget about the whole thing, so all of this interest in the story now is kind of surprising.

No, I don't really mind talking to you, not at this point, and maybe it's time to set the record straight. I think I'm finally old enough and understand enough that I can tell you the real story, or at least my version of the real story.

I don't suppose that I really even started putting it all together until years later. Actually, I think the light started to dawn at about the time that my husband and I were celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary, which was kind of a miracle in itself, considering how we started out, two kids with no real prospects sailing off on the Impresario's boat to that creepy island. The early years of our marriage weren't that easy or happy, for reasons I probably don't have to mention. The Impresario was paying for my psychoanalysis the whole time my husband and I were living in Manhattan, but I didn't need an analyst digging around inside my head to know what was bugging me, and if that meant going through the rest of my life with a phobia about apes, well, I could live with that. I never much cared for zoos anyway, but I was starting to develop a phobia about bearded guys with German accents. And I was beginning to realize that if my marriage was going to have any chance of lasting, I'd have to put what happened with me and that big gorilla behind me for good.

So I did. I avoided thinking about those days at all, just pretended to myself that they never happened, and it helped, believe me. Pretty soon, I didn't wake up in the middle of the night screaming and my man was able to get a good night's sleep. But as time went by, and I picked up what you might call a different perspective, I began to see that the Impresario had actually done me a big favor, whether he intended to or not. I'd been around the track a few times, if you know what I mean, and things weren't going to get any better for me, not during the Depression, anyway. Without the Impresario, I wouldn't have been on that boat where I met my husband, and I wouldn't have had a shot later on at a career on Broadway and in pictures, even if that didn't quite pan out in the end. I wouldn't have had all those happy years in California, and I guess I don't really have to explain why we were just as happy to get out of New York. My husband wouldn't have made all that money in real estate after World War II—it didn't hurt that he got to know Ronnie Reagan while they were making all those morale boosters for the Army together—and I wouldn't be sitting here in this ritzy old age home talking to you. And now I'm old enough and I've lived long enough to understand what that big ape must have gone through. I can even have some sympathy for the old gorilla.

Yeah, you've got that right. Maybe I was picking up on that from the start, maybe that's how I was able to survive the whole experience. Things might have been tough for me, but they were a whole lot tougher for that giant ape. He'd been through some pretty hard times long before I ever got to his island.

Here's something I only understood later. The Impresario had this nutty idea—people nowadays would call it racist—that the way to capture the big ape was to attract him with some white woman. But in all honesty, a lot of those babes in that African village could have given me a

run for my money in the looks department. About the only thing I had going for me there, lookswise, was being a novelty, and that novelty probably would have worn off really fast after a few more weeks in the jungle, when my roots would have started to show and I probably would have picked up one hell of a sunburn. The truth was that, for whatever reason, and maybe it was just plain loneliness, the ape would show up at the village wall, and they'd set out some poor girl or other to keep him away, and then he'd carry her off, probably worrying the whole time about how he was going to take care of her in a place where you've got dinosaurs running around, especially if she's screaming all the time. And then he'd lose her sooner or later, and he'd get even more depressed and lonely, so he'd come back for another babe, and then he'd lose her, too. Some T. rex would grab her, or a pterodactyl would carry her off, or she'd fall off a cliff.

It had to be depressing, to put it mildly. After a while, he must have felt like he was trapped in one of those nightmares that keeps repeating itself, like the ones I used to discuss with my analyst. He comes back to the village, finds another girl tied up and waiting for him, probably screaming her head off the same way I did, and the folks in the village beating their drums and waving their torches around and just basically telling him to grab the girl and go away. Off he goes, with the poor woman still screaming her head off, and maybe he just wants her to stop screaming. It's making him feel really inadequate, all that screaming and carrying on—I can tell you that I never knew a guy who didn't cringe and feel horrible if a gal started screaming whenever he so much as laid a hand on her, unless he was the kind of guy you really didn't want to know. So here's the ape, carrying still another girl off to his cave or wherever, and no matter what he does, something awful happens to her. I don't know how anybody, even a big gorilla, goes through that without becoming seriously traumatized, do you?

What about his life before that? That's a good question. I didn't start sorting that out until after the Impresario came back from his second expedition and I found out that the big gorilla's son saved his life, not that this good deed did Junior any good. I mean, I didn't know before then that the big ape had anything like a family life, but obviously he did, and obviously there was what you could call a Mrs. Giant Gorilla around, or there wouldn't have been any son. Let's be honest—a big giant female ape should have had a lot more appeal for a big gorilla than a teeny little bottle blonde from New Jersey. For one thing, besides the obvious, namely being a lot closer to his size, she probably would have been able to handle herself in that jungle. Any pterodactyl coming after her would

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have had his wings pinned in a big hurry. The big guy wouldn't have had to worry about how he was going to protect her, either, and—here's something else I probably wouldn't have understood if I hadn't lived this long—he must have admired her independence. They would have had what the young folks nowadays call an egalitarian relationship. I'm willing to bet that they had a pretty good time in those early years, hanging around the cave and beating up a dino now and then, and then the kid came along.

Now, much as I wish my husband and I had been able to have some kids of our own, you have to admit that having a kid can affect a marriage, and not always for the better. You know how it goes. The wife's home with the kid all day while her husband's out with the guys. Or the kid's crying all night and nobody can get any sleep, or one parent's big on whipping the kid into shape and the other one's reading Dr. Spock or whatever nice old geezer is writing about babies these days. It could be any number of things, but my guess is that the ape and his mate had a big falling-out, and it probably involved child care issues as they'd put it nowadays, and the missus finally up and left and took the kid with her. All I know is that I didn't see any little gorillas running around while I was there, and I think I would have noticed even if I wasn't exactly making careful observations, but obviously Junior had to be on that island somewhere or he couldn't have saved the Impresario later on. And a little gorilla wouldn't have been any safer there without a big gorilla to look out for him than I would have been. So since the big ape wasn't looking out for the kid, his kid's mother had to be.

He must have been thinking of her. Maybe that's why he went to the village in the first place—maybe he thought she was hiding out somewhere nearby. I can't imagine what he might have been thinking when the villagers first started tying up women outside the wall for him, but by then he might have really needed some female companionship, even if it was kind of on the small scale. And maybe he was so mad at his mate for leaving that he kind of liked the idea of having some tiny little woman around who had to look up to him. He wouldn't be the first.

And then he would lose the women, one by one. First the one big dame he cares about who can take care of herself walks out on him, and that has to be a blow to his ego, and then he can't even protect the ones who are completely dependent on him. I don't even want to think of what my analyst might have said about that. And after that, he's got my husband and the Impresario coming after him, and he gets dragged off to New York, and—well, I don't have to go into all of that.

A male archetype, my analyst called him—my analyst was actually more of a Jungian than a Freudian, if you must know. He claimed that's why there were so many stories about the big ape in the papers and the tale was so compelling and scary and the movie was so popular for so long and the big gorilla became such a famous public figure, even if you'd think having a giant ape running around in New York and then getting shot off the Empire State Building would be enough by itself to get a lot of coverage. But I don't know about this male archetype stuff, or any of that Freudian or Jungian bushwah or whatever you want to call it.

I think something else entirely was going on.

I don't know when it might have happened—maybe it wasn't until they caught him and tied him up, maybe it wasn't until he was getting shot at by all those planes—but I think at some point, the big ape realized that it was men who were responsible for all his troubles. Not his missus, who maybe just needed some time to find herself, or the African babes, or me with my screaming probably giving him a splitting headache, but guys in general. I'll bet the men in that African village weren't paying attention to anything the women there said, or they could have saved themselves a whole lot of trouble, I mean you can't tell me that it was the women who decided to send some poor girl out to a big gorilla. The Impresario sure as hell didn't listen to me when I told him that maybe it wasn't such a hot idea to walk out on that stage with my man and stand there in front of the big guy while people shot photos. And I think in the end, when the ape and I were trapped on the Empire State Building, when he decided to put me down instead of hanging on to me, he knew what he was doing.

He wasn't thinking about me or my welfare, even if putting me down did save my life. He was thinking of his mate and his son. That's my guess, anyway. He was thinking that maybe she wouldn't have left him if he'd treated her differently, if he'd done more of his share around the cave. You probably don't know this, but by the time we made it up to the top of the Empire State Building, my throat was really sore from all that screaming, and there were tears all over my face, and, since I didn't have a handkerchief or anything, I was snorting like hell just to keep my nose from running. And I remember how he looked at me when I was snorting. He had this strange, sad look in his eyes, as if I reminded him of something, as if he'd heard that sound before and it reminded him of something he'd lost. I think his mate must have snorted like that. I was snorting and I think I might have picked up a few fleas, because I was scratching, too, and my guess is he was remembering how his mate would sit around snorting and scratching in their cave, and he was thinking of her and their son and maybe about all those other women he'd lost after that. Seems to me that would be enough for him to give up on everything then and there. I really doubt it was that beauty-and-savage-beast nonsense the Impresario was so fond of quoting.

That's what everybody seems to have missed all these years. The giant ape wasn't some Freudian symbolism come to life, or an archetype, or the noble savage brought low. He was a fella who lost a dame who was his equal and lost some others who could never be his equals and then realized what it was he really wanted after all and by then it was too late, because a bunch of guys had taken away any chance of him getting it back.

I'll admit it. I'll bet he was wishing he'd done better by Mrs. Big Ape. He was probably thinking that things would have been a lot better for him if the women in the village could have gotten a word in edgewise and the Impresario had listened to me. You may think this is nuts, but in the end, I'm guessing that the big guy had finally become what you could call a kind of feminist. ○

HELL ON WHEELS

the monster GMC two and a half ton pickup
proclaims in Old English
across the wide silver-toothed grin of its grill.
The giant front end dwarfs
my little green Escort
as I park in the lot this wintry day;
and I see a Hieronymous Bosch
panel explicating events
within the cylindrical innards
of its internal combustion engine,
tortured souls expanding and contracting
as they are ignited, their agonized faces,
part smoke ring, part expressionist *Scream*.
Not horse but soul power pushes
these pistons, powers the crankshaft
and turns these Brimstone wheels,
the fuel line funneling Hell-fired
soular power with the Devil in the details—
Old Nick, riding shotgun
somewhere in the alternator,
sending the sparks that ignite the pain.
I walk into work smiling,
pleased now that all is explained.

—Sandra J. Lindow

James Van Pelt's first novel, *Summer of the Apocalypse*, will be released from Fairwood Press in October. The author has published tales in most of the major science fiction magazines. His short story, "The Last of the O-Forms" (*Asimov's*, September 2002) was a finalist for the Nebula award. His collection, *The Last of the O-Forms and Other Stories*, was named as a Best Book for Young Adults by the American Library Association. Jim reveals a deep understanding of the young adult mind in his compassionate tale about . . .

THE SMALL ASTRAL OBJECT GENIUS

James Van Pelt

Dustin set the Peek-a-boo on his desk next to the computer. The softball-sized metal sphere rolled an inch before clicking against the keyboard, the only sound in the silent house. The house was almost always quiet now, noiseless as an empty kitchen, its cabinets neatly shut, the plates and dishes gradually collecting dust. Where to send it? Maybe this time something incredible would happen, if he just kept trying.

His computer listed options, starting with large objects or small ones. After he'd first bought the Peek-a-boo, he spent weeks sending it to the large ones: galaxies, nebulas, the gaseous remains of supernovas, star clusters. He'd double check the batteries, make sure the lens was clean, then choose one of the preprogrammed destinations. Sometimes he'd balance the device on his palm, hoping to feel the microsecond that it vanished in its dash across the light years before returning to his hand, but he never did. Not even a tingle. It sat against his skin, cool and hard and heavy, its absence too brief to sense.

An instant later, his computer pinged and the "picture taken" icon

blinked red and green. Immediately would follow a confirmation from the Peek-a-boo Project website. "Thank you for participating," the message would say, or, if he was really lucky, "New object! You have contributed to man's knowledge of the universe," and his face would tingle with joy.

He'd heard rumors among his friends that there were other messages, but he'd never seen them himself.

Lots of times, of course, the monitor showed nothing, just a black screen with maybe a wink of a star here or there. But, every once in a while, the Peek-a-boo appeared in the distant space oriented perfectly and captured a spectacular image. He used to like nebulas best. Several DVDs full of pictures rested on the shelf above the computer. He'd devoted an entire disk to the Rosette Nebula, taking pictures from all the angles over the course of two weeks, its vermillion gasses thrown out in parsecs wide petals. But lately he'd turned his attention to small objects: individual stars, planets, and moons.

On the monitor, the computer gave him hundreds of preprogrammed selections. He carefully entered instead the coordinates for a planet circling Bellatrix, a giant star about 240 light years away on Orion's right shoulder, then sent the Peek-a-boo. "Picture taken," winked the message. The image began forming on the screen. Dustin leaned back in his chair, his hands resting one on the other on his chest.

Behind him, the door to his bedroom opened. He knew by the click of the doorknob, the distance the door swung into the room, a hint of lavender in the air, that it was his mother. She stood behind him without speaking for a moment, then sighed.

"Yes?" Dustin said.

She sighed again.

He turned his chair. Her hand cupped the doorknob with fingers so delicate that he wondered how she could pick up anything heavier than a pen or a book.

"Are you coming to dinner?" Her lips were colorless and thin, like her voice, but dark circles marked her eyes. He couldn't remember when Mom looked like she'd had a good night's sleep.

"Now?"

She blinked, as if his question was cruel.

"Unless you want to eat later. Your father is eating later."

"I'm not hungry." Almost half the image had appeared on the screen. Already he could see the planet's curve. This could be a good one, he thought. He forced his eyes away from the picture. If he phrased the question just right, he could make a difference. "I don't think I'll have anything. Could we wait?"

She shook her head, and then slowly backed away, pulling the door with her. "I'll put a plate in the refrigerator for you in case," she said as the door closed.

Dustin shivered for a second in the room's silence. She was like a ghost in her own house, drifting from room to room. He couldn't remember the last time she'd touched him. Maybe she wasn't even capable of it anymore. If he tried to hug her, would his arms pass through?

The planet on the monitor finished forming, a violet sphere with dark-

er bands, like Jupiter, the arc of the terminator hiding a third of the surface. "Thank you for participating" popped over the image. He shook his head as he cleared the message. He hadn't "contributed to man's knowledge of the universe." Other people had taken this picture and added it to the database. No rings on the planet that he could see. No moons. Still, how rare, he thought. Perfect trade material. The smaller the object, the less chance his friends would have it. Space wasn't just mostly empty; it was depressingly, hugely empty. If all space was the size of his bedroom, the total mass of every galaxy and star and planet wouldn't fill a thimble. Getting a picture of an object as small as a planet 240 light years away boggled the mind. He tweaked the coordinates and sent the Peek-a-boo again for a closer look, but the image came back black. The unit might have appeared closer to the planet but with its lens pointed the wrong way, or a number in the coordinates so far down the decimal line that he couldn't imagine it ticked up or down one time too many, and the Peek-a-boo wasn't in the planet's range.

He sent it again. Black screen.

Again. Black screen.

Again.

His door opened. Dad said, "Dustin, I'm eating dinner in forty minutes. The dining room should be free then."

"I'm not hungry, Dad. I'm working on something."

Dustin could almost hear his dad grimace. "You didn't eat already, did you?" He stepped next to Dustin's chair. Dustin looked at Dad's feet, which were bare. The toenails were trimmed neatly, although they'd grown longer than he was used to seeing. "You didn't eat with her, did you?" Dad said.

"No, really, I'm working on my computer . . ." Dustin drew in a shaky breath, ". . . but I'll go down now, if you want." Dustin tapped in an adjustment before sending the Peek-a-boo again.

Dad leaned in toward the screen, his hand on the chair's back behind Dustin's shoulder. "It's a hoax, you know. That toy doesn't go anywhere. It generates random images. Everyone knows you can't travel faster than light, and certainly not with a half pound of plastic and a couple double-A batteries."

The computer indicated that the coordinates were ready. Dustin pressed the send command. "It's aluminum, not plastic, and it's not a hoax. Didn't you read that stuff I gave you about Peek-a-boo theory? Interstellar distance is a mathematical conception or something like that. Wrinkly space, they call it. Just a little push the right way, and the Peek-a-boo bounces across the wrinkle and back."

"It's Crackerjack physics, son. Nobody believes it."

"Scientists do. Every time I take a photograph, it uploads into NASA's database. We're expanding the knowledge of the universe! People all over the world are part of it! Amateurs have always been a big part of astronomy."

Dad humphed. "You know what the scam is? Sporadic reinforcement. Every once in a while you get a pat on the back, and you keep trying. It's why fishermen fish. You wouldn't believe how many Pokemon packs I

bought when I was a kid, just hoping for a first edition holographic rare. Hundreds of dollars lost, I'll bet."

"The pictures are real, Dad," he said as a new image formed on the screen. At the very bottom a hint of violet curve filled in. "See, it's the same planet. I've been peppering these coordinates for a couple days." The image looked so authentic. Dustin thought, no way this is fake. No way!

Dad shrugged his shoulders. "I'm heating a pizza later. Come down if you want any."

"Not tonight. Sorry." Dustin punched the send button again. Maybe he could get a full globe shot for trade tomorrow.

Through Dustin's open shades, the stars above the western horizon flickered behind the maple's waving branches. Slowly, the nearly full moon slid through the last of the November leaves, then past each branch, lower and lower. Before it touched the top of his neighbor's house, Mars joined the gradual descent. The planet and the Moon appeared close in the sky, but he knew it was an illusion. Even if their edges touched, they were really millions of miles apart. Still, he liked seeing them so close. If only he could send the Peek-a-boo there! What wonders he might see—but wrinkly space didn't wrinkle at that distance. The closest he could send the Peek-a-boo was about one hundred light years.

One by one, Pisces's last stars disappeared, and Aries, its twinkling lights wrapped around the war god, followed the creeping parade.

The clock next to the bed flicked to four AM. Dustin listened intently. Not a living sound in the house. His parents' bedroom was directly below his. A year ago, he could hear them talking. No words, but a comforting, conversational rise and fall. Sometimes even laughter. Then, six months ago, it had been arguments. Shouting, to weeping, to nothing. Mother slept there still. If her shades were open like his, the moonlight would flood her space, but Dustin hadn't seen her windows open for months. In the middle of the day, she'd be in bed in the darkened room, or she'd vacuum by the tiny vacuum cleaner's light, like a dim-eyed Cyclops rolling along the carpet.

Dad slept in his study by the garage.

Dustin pushed his covers aside, crept down to the kitchen, and ate a piece of cold pizza. The milk tasted sour, and the label said it had passed its expiration date by six days, so he washed it down with orange juice.

"I'll trade you a shot from the interior of the Horse Head Nebula looking toward Earth for that planetgraph you have there," said Slade. He'd dyed his Mohawk blue the week before but hadn't touched it up since, so it had turned a coppery green. A spread of pictures covered the desk before him, and his CD carrier, filled with thousands of other images he'd either taken himself or traded for, sat in the black case next to the prints. "Come on, it's a good deal. All the UV bands are expressed. You could hang it in a museum." In the hallway beyond the classroom door, voices rose and fell, the busy traffic of the middle school at lunch.

Dustin handled the print, a really lovely image marked by delicate curtains of pink and vermillion. A series of numbers printed at the bottom

told him how many pictures Slade had taken, and how rare the current image was. The higher the number at the bottom combined with the rarity of the image and the prestige of the photographer determined its tradability. *Peek-a-boo Monthly* printed profiles of individuals who captured the most spectacular and rare shots. Both Slade and Dustin had been listed in the "honorable mentions" in past issues, which made all their prints more valuable. He put it down. "Nice picture, but it's common. Peek-a-boo defaults to the nebulas. My grandmother could get it."

"Yeah, but not this quality."

Three other boys had gathered at their table in the empty classroom, their lunches in their laps. Each had a folder with his own pictures and his own CDs filled with images. "I'll trade for it," said one. He wore a T-shirt that read, IF I WERE AN ALIEN, I WOULDN'T TALK TO US EITHER.

Slade hardly looked at him. Dustin knew that Slade had taken every image of interest from the boy already. The only other person in the school with anything that might appeal to Slade was Dustin.

"I've never taken a close-up of an object smaller than a star. You're like a small astral object genius. How are you finding them?"

Dustin thought about the hours of punching the send command, the boxes of batteries, the long stretches of useless images that made him wonder if his monitor still worked, the quiet creak of the door behind him that told him either Mom or Dad was checking up. He would hunch closer to the screen and pretend he hadn't heard. Dad had told him once, when he was much younger, "Accept the things you can't change and change the things you can." He couldn't get them to talk, but he could take pictures of the stars, so he pressed the send button again and again.

"I keep trying," he said.

"Where's this one from?" Slade put his finger on the violet planet from last night.

"Bellatrix. I like the named objects. Tonight I thought I'd go for stars in Pisces. Maybe Torcularis Septentrionali."

"Too small. Too far away."

Dustin put the planet's image back into his stack. "I got this one, didn't I? Persistence pays."

A dark-haired girl with hair hanging over her eyes opened the door into the classroom, filling it with hallway sound. Another girl stood behind her, her eyes just as hidden. "Oh," dark-haired said, "I thought this room was empty at lunch." Dustin turned in his chair so he could see her better, his images in hand. She said, "Ewww, it's the star geeks. Weren't you guys doing role-playing games last year?"

The two girls laughed as the door shut.

After school Dustin reluctantly put aside the romantically named stars he'd concentrated on for the last months: Dubhe, Alphard, Shedir, and others. (Their names made him think of an old Sunday school tale about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. The idea of their names and stars and fiery furnaces had mixed in his head ever since.) Instead, he turned to G, F, and K class stars, all of which possibly could support life if they had planets the proper distance away. Numbers and letters labeled them.

Sunlight through the window warmed his desktop, and he thought about drawing the curtain, but the heat felt good on his hands and arms.

The Peek-a-boo database contained over two million celestial objects. He picked a G-class star randomly, set the coordinates and punched the send button. The Peek-a-boo rested on its display base by his keyboard, a bit of dust marking its smooth curve. It didn't twitch, but within seconds a few pinpricks of light showed on the monitor. "Thank you for participating," said the popup message. He sent the Peek-a-boo again. A completely empty image this time. He rested his chin on his forearm, pressed the send button over and over. Eventually the sun slipped below the horizon, and for a while the maple tree stood as a shadow against the sunset sky. But the tree faded away, and only the early evening stars were visible. Vega and Altair shone brightly high on the window.

He thought about the Earth's orbit. If an Earth-like planet circled this star (which he hadn't even seen yet—it was possible the Peek-a-boo was missing it by dozens of light years), then it was like trying to find a dime on a high-school track in the dark. He pressed the send again.

Downstairs, the front door opened. Dustin didn't stir. It would be his mother. She came home first. Her keys clattered into the bowl on the table by the coat closet. Her steps creaked on the squeaky third and seventh stairs. Without looking, he knew when she stopped in the hallway behind him.

"Hi, Mom. You're home late."

"Did you father call to check on you?"

"No."

"It was his turn."

Dustin turned in his chair. Mom's hand rested on the door's frame. Everything about her, her hair, her make-up, the tidy lines of her blue pantsuit, was realtor neat. Her matching blue purse dangled from the crook of her elbow.

"Did you sell a house?"

"He's supposed to check up on you today. That's the agreement."

"It's no big deal." Dustin squeezed the back of his chair. His knuckles ached. "Maybe he did call, and I missed it. I've been on the computer."

The rumble of Dad's engine filled the driveway. Then the click of his car opening and closing. Mom looked panicked for a moment, before coming into the room. She sat on the edge of Dustin's bed, her purse in her lap.

"What are you working on?" She glanced at the door.

"It's a new star," said Dustin. "I haven't tried to find it before." On the screen, the popup said, "New object! You have contributed to man's knowledge of the universe." Heart thumping, he cleared the message, and behind it, dead center, glowed a white disk the size of a silver dollar. "I got it," he said.

"That's a star?" She sounded doubtful.

"A new one, or at least I've taken a picture that no one else has. That's what the message meant. Look, I can manipulate it." He clicked on the "effects" choice in the toolbar and chose "eclipse." The disk blinked out, but the star's corona remained, a bright ring of light marked by a small flare on the lower right side. "This star is a lot like the Sun."

"It probably is the Sun," said Dad.

Mom flinched.

"I hope your grades aren't suffering because of this game." He walked past Mom without looking at her, then said to Dustin, "I brought Chinese if you're hungry."

Dustin saved the image, nudged the coordinates and sent the Peek-a-boo out again.

Dad picked up the Peek-a-boo and flipped it from one hand to the other. "There's a guy in my office who brought one of these to work." Dustin rose partway from the chair, then forced himself back.

"They're a little fragile."

"They caught the guy playing with it during work hours." Dad tossed the sphere to Dustin. He caught it with both hands, cushioning it, before putting it back on its stand. Dad said, "They fired him. Good career shot because of a kid's toy, but I figured he wouldn't last anyways. Talked about *Star Trek* episodes like they were Shakespeare. Idiot."

Mom said, "I'll fix something for myself later, if you want to eat, Dustin." Dad closed his eyes for a second. She stood, then walked stiffly out of the room. Dustin wanted to ask her to stay, but he didn't speak. The two of them together were like split-screen videos: both animate and responding, although not to each other.

"You're not sending these Peek-a-boo people any money, are you?"

"Dad, there's just the connect charge, and I pay for that."

"With allowance money I give you. No one can prove the images you are taking are of anything, son. There's an article in today's *Newsweek* that shows it's a fake. Why don't you just get involved in online games like a normal kid?"

Dustin watched his computer's monitor. Three stars appeared in the upper left corner, but the screen was otherwise dark. He rested his fingertips on the keyboard. "Can I ask Mom to eat with us?"

"You can't take a picture of what's not there." Dad stepped toward the door, loosening his tie. He paused, one finger caught in the silk, the knot half undone. "She hates Chinese."

For the rest of the night, Dustin sent the Peek-a-boo out, over and over. He changed batteries at two, when he realized twenty black screens in a row and no "Thank you for participating" messages meant the device hadn't moved. The challenge was that not only did Dustin not know if the star had planets circling it, but he didn't know what their orbital plane was. He could send the Peek-a-boo the right distance from the star and miss because the planet could be anywhere in the sphere of distance that far away. Plus, the Peek-a-boo could appear pointing in the wrong direction. All he could do was keep trying.

He did get several more good shots of the star, though. He spent an hour running the best ones through the effects: corona analysis, blue-light shift, red-light shift, x-ray rendered, radio rendered, various luminosity lines emphasized, all the filters. In every way, it came out within a few percentage points of the sun. Twice more he received, "New object! You have contributed to man's knowledge of the universe."

* * *

Slade looked glum. "Have you ever lost a Peek-a-boo?" He hadn't opened his portfolio or his lunch. It didn't look like a trading day.

"No," said Dustin. His eyes felt heavy, like they were filled with syrup. When he'd finally fallen asleep, the Sun had risen. "Did you leave it somewhere?"

"Not misplaced. I mean *lost* the whole fricking thing? I sent it out, and it didn't come back. One second it's there, and the next it's gone."

Dustin sat up. "Gone? Like gone, gone?"

"Yeah, bang, loud-noise-hurt-my-ears gone, and get this: a message from the Peek-a-boo Project pops up and says, 'An unexpected anomaly occurred during transmission. You must replace your unit. Thank you for participating.' It gave me a 10 percent off coupon for my next purchase. What a rip-off!"

"So, what did you do?"

"I called Peek-a-boo, of course! Twenty-four hour service, my ass. It's a recorded message and a gazillion choices. So, I work my way down the menu, and you know what they said? 'Although very rare, an unexpected anomaly could include your Peek-a-boo unit occupying simultaneous space with a solid object, such as a star.' My aunt told me the whole thing is a con to get kids to buy more Peek-a-boos. That they really aren't taking pictures at all."

Dustin looked at Slade's folder. He did have beautiful images. "Are you going to quit?"

Slade pushed away from his table. He touched his hand to the side of his Mohawk to make sure it was still straight. "Even if they're fake, I like the pictures. I'll talk my stepmom out of the money when she's in a good mood." He smirked, "Besides, my grades in science have never been better."

None of the other kids who traded at lunch were in the room. Dustin's own folder, with the new star pictures, unshown inside, rested under his hand. A thought occurred to him. "Did you pick up the pieces?"

"What?" Slade pushed his portfolio under his arm so he could open his lunch bag.

"The pieces from your Peek-a-boo, when it exploded?"

Slade laughed. "There weren't any pieces! There wasn't even any smoke. It exploded into nothing. Total whack job."

When Dustin was alone, and the only sounds were kids yelling to each other in the hallways, he smiled.

Mom sat on the edge of the bed, just as she had the night before, except this pantsuit matched her beige purse. "We may need to make some changes soon, Dustin."

Warily, Dustin watched her. "Like what?"

She toyed with her purse's clasp. "School, maybe. Probably a different house. A condo, perhaps. I know of some nice ones below market price nearer to my office." She glanced up, dry eyed, just for an instant. "At least for part of the time."

Dustin felt his lungs constricting. It took effort for him to say, "This is temporary, right? It's just till things patch together?"

She slumped. "If it makes you feel better to believe that, sure."

In the empty time after she left, Dustin pushed the send button repeatedly, not really looking at the monitor, even when he got a good shot of the new star. He saved the image mechanically. No planet. Send. Send. Send.

A half hour later, Dad delivered almost the same speech, except it was an apartment with a great view of the mountains.

Dustin had lined the double-A batteries on his desk like bullets. Every couple of hours he popped two used ones out of the Peek-a-boo. Spent casings, he thought. They dropped to the carpet.

His hands trembled on the keyboard. He swallowed dryly. Somewhere around this star, maybe, circled a planet the same distance from its star as Earth. He'd found the system's Jupiter about eleven PM. So many systems had a Jupiter, an oversized lump of a planet, always about the same distance from the center. Star system evolution turned out to be remarkably similar, time after time. Many stars formed planets, and they formed them in about the same way, and it was because of their Jupiters that the inner planets were shielded. Jupiters inhaled planet-busting comets and shepherded the loose debris into tidy orbits that would otherwise careen about unchecked. But the inner planets were so much smaller. The giant planets protected, but they also overwhelmed with their size and strength. They distracted.

Where was the tiny glimmer of the inner planets? Dustin fine-tuned the coordinates, kicking the Peek-a-boo from one side of the star to the other, always taking a half-dozen pictures from one coordinate before shifting again. Even at the same coordinates, though, the unit might appear millions of miles from the last spot. A three-dimensional graph of the appearances would eventually surround a location, but there was no fine control. He could only keep trying.

At three in the morning, the Peek-a-boo felt slick and cool under his fingers. A twitch on the keyboard sent it out again. Stars appeared on the monitor. "Thank you for participating." He sent it out again. The Peek-a-boo never failed him. It always came back (but Slade's hadn't!). Graveyard silence filled the house. Out the window, clouds covered the night sky, so all he saw was his own shimmery image, like he was someone else: a small boy's spirit, his elbows planted on his ghost desk in a ghost world looking at his ghost computer. Dustin almost waved, but something stirred behind him in the reflection. He was too tired to be startled. Standing at the door, illuminated by the monitor's faint light, his dad in pajamas looked in. His face had no color, no life, and two shadowed pits marked where his eyes should have been. Dad leaned against the door-jamb, watching Dustin, or he might have been looking beyond him, or his eyes could have been closed. The pose held for a marble moment.

Dustin blinked, and the apparition was gone. Had he really seen him? A few seconds later, the stairs creaked; Dad going down.

For a hundred heartbeats, Dustin stared at his reflection, and then through the ghost boy to the maple tree he couldn't see, and beyond that to the clouds that covered the stars, and through them to the stars them-

selves, trying to understand. Dad had appeared and disappeared without a sound except the squeak on the stair. Everything done in silence. No noise that Dustin didn't make himself in the perpetually quiet house. He pressed the send button again, and the key's cricket click seemed big in the muffling stillness.

The image of himself in the glass and the wavery memory of his dad behind him defined Dustin's universe. Nothing else existed. Then a new image began forming on his monitor from the top down. Not black. Yellow from side to side, like candle flame. Not a starscape. Not even a distant planet hovering in the velvet abyss. On the screen's left side, a corner of something red appeared. A straight line built toward the screen's bottom, and then an orange sphere formed on the screen's right side. The computer pinged three times. A new popup message flashed across the image: "DO NOT TOUCH YOUR PEEK-A-BOO OR TURN OFF YOUR COMPUTER!" At the same time, his phone rang. A second later, his cell phone, recharging on the nightstand, chimed for attention.

Dustin jerked back. Who could be calling at three in the morning? They'd wake his parents! He picked up the phone. A recorded announcement said, "This is a Peek-a-boo priority communication. Information from your Peek-a-boo unit indicates a unique contact. Please do not attempt to send your Peek-a-boo device out again or switch programs on your computer. Representatives from Peek-a-boo will communicate with you immediately. . . . This is a Peek-a-boo priority communication. . . ."

Dad's voice interrupted. "What have you done, Dustin? Do you know what time it is?"

Mom said sleepily over the phone, "What is going on? What is going on?"

The image finished forming on the monitor behind the popup message. Dustin hesitated, the phone still to his ear. "Please do not attempt to send your Peek-a-boo device out again or switch programs on your computer," repeated the voice. Dustin closed the popup window; the screen glowed yellow, orange, and red in crisp lines and shapes.

"I didn't do anything," he said. "I don't know."

"I'm coming up," said Dad.

The stairs creaked beneath his mom's slippers feet.

Mom arrived first, then Dad. They gathered behind his chair.

Dad said, "Why are they calling you in the middle of the night?"

"I don't know, Dad. Something about this." He gestured toward the monitor.

Mom said, "Is that a screensaver?"

In the distance, a police car siren sounded, coming closer.

Dustin's face flushed, the phone still in his hand, repeating the message over and over. "No, my Peek-a-boo took it."

"What is it?" Dad leaned over Dustin's shoulder. The upper half of the monitor showed colored shapes in sharp geometry. A mottled grey and yellow texture filled the bottom half, but all the angles were skewed so the image seemed to be sliding off the screen's left side.

The siren turned onto Dustin's street, its flashing blue and red lights reflecting off the neighborhood trees until the car parked in his driveway.

The siren wailed to silence, and a few seconds later, a heavy knocking came from the front door.

His parents looked at Dustin first, and then toward the pounding downstairs. "Don't touch your computer, son," said Dad.

Another car without a siren or flashing lights pulled into the driveway. Doors opened. Voices jumbled together outside.

Minutes later, his room full of strangers, Dustin sat on his bed's edge and said, "I just kept sending it out." An earnest older man whose shirt was tucked in on only one side wrote Dustin's comment in a notebook.

"Had you seen a planet on that coordinate earlier?" he asked. Dustin shook his head. At Dustin's desk, two women, one in a bathrobe, and the other in a nice pantsuit, whispered vehemently back and forth about the image. "We'll need his hard drive. It could be a fake," Pantsuit said. "I don't see how," replied Bathrobe.

A man in uniform, but definitely not a policeman, carefully rolled Dustin's Peek-a-boo into a plastic bag that zipped closed when the unit plopped to the bottom.

From the hallway, Mom's voice said, "He's always been a determined boy."

Dad said, "So, you think he really found something, do you?" His tone was skeptical.

Someone in the hallway said, "He'll be famous."

"Look at this," said Bathrobe. She moved the cursor to the menu bar at the top of the screen. A few clicks later, the image reoriented itself. Now the grey and yellow texture moved to the top and became sky. Dustin blinked, then blinked again. What had seemed abstract before suddenly made sense. "Is that . . ." he said, and swallowed. "Is that a building?"

Pantsuit pointed to what had been a red blob before, "Yes, and that looks like a tree to me. . ." she bent close to the screen, ". . . with a park bench under it. It's only a yellow slab on what appears to be concrete legs, but what else could it be used for?"

"I don't believe it," said Bathrobe, in a voice that made it clear she did.

The older man sitting on the bed with Dustin said to himself, "It's such a big universe. What are the odds a Peek-a-boo would appear close enough to a planet's surface, oriented just the right way, to take a picture of a park bench?"

Bathrobe said, "A park bench 380 million light years from Earth."

Dustin lay in his bed. The clouds had cleared, and early dawn lightened the sky enough through his window to dissolve the stars and show the blank area on his desk where his computer had sat earlier that night. Now, though, only a clean square outlined by a fine dust film showed that anything had been there at all.

"We'll replace this computer," Bathrobe had said as she left with the CPU. Pantsuit added, "And a new Peek-a-boo, even better than your old one. Later today, there will be a news conference."

The older man patted Dustin on the head as he left. "There will be a lot of news conferences, I'd say, now that you showed us where to look."

After all the bustle, after the doors slammed below and the cars de-

parted, Dustin finally climbed into bed, but he couldn't sleep. For the longest time he stared out the window, his sheets pulled to his chin, hands locked behind his head. A few days ago, the Moon had preceded Mars to the horizon, but now the red planet set first, while the Moon followed, dragging Pleiades like star babies close behind. He thought about the stars passing by his window as if they were friends: Hamal, of course, and Menkar, and the sprinkling of tau stars, omi Tau, xi Tau and f Tau, then Aldebaran and Algol, and Betelgeuse, who faded last in the lightening sky. They all seemed so comforting that he didn't notice at first that the house had changed. For the longest time he tried to place the difference. Not just the missing computer. Not just the strangeness of the night's events. Something else.

He gasped in surprise, then silenced his breathing so he could hear. Below him, in his parents' room, he heard voices: his mom and dad, talking. The conversation rose and fell. It had been going on since they'd left his room. Once, he could swear, he heard laughter. Long after the morning sky had brightened to blue and the maple tree cast its shadow on the fence and their neighbor's house, Dustin listened, and not once, that morning, did his parents quit talking. Not even when they moved into the kitchen. Not even when they began fixing breakfast. Their voices broke the long silence, and Dustin knew he wasn't alone in the house.

He wasn't alone, and it was time to eat. ○

I WAS A TEENAGE WEREWOLF

I was a teenage werewolf!
It was intense, lurid, shocking!
But as an adult werewolf,
I got tired of all the stalking.
Middle age comes for werewolves too,
and the full moon's no longer enough.
At old age, what's a wolf to do?
Fangs fail; even baby skin's too tough.
Rather than moonlight, I seek sun,
suck bird bones and curse my ills.
"Teenage werewolf! I was one!"
"That's nice dear. Now take your pills!"



—Greg Beatty

1 IS TRUE

Ron Collins

Ron Collins's writing has appeared in *Analog*, *Dragon*, *Writers of the Future*, and several other magazines and anthologies. He holds a degree in mechanical engineering, and has worked on developing avionics systems, electronics, and information technology. Ron lives in Columbus, Indiana, with his wife Lisa, and their daughter Brigid. His unsettling tale about the ultimate in software and why "1 Is True" is his first for *Asimov's*.

The boot loomed inches from Gordie's face. Scuffs marred its surface like kill strokes on the side of a fighter aircraft. He focused on the boot, trying to breathe. The cracked cement floor pressed unmercifully into his cheekbone.

The brown boot moved.

Whumpf.

Gordie sucked vacuum.

"You gettin' the idea that I don't give a rat's fuck for your piss-ant hide?" The inspector's voice echoed through the room.

Whumpf.

Muscles cramped. Fire flared like fluid on charcoal. Chromium pain came with each swing of the inspector's leg, a leg that right now winched back like a battering ram.

Whumpf.

Gordie's vision went gray. The boot squeaked against the floor.

"I already said I don't know nothing," Gordie croaked, thinking about pulverized ribs, imagining himself bruised and bloated up with internal bleeding like a grotesque balloon in a holiday parade. He didn't code anymore, hadn't run his fingers over a keyboard since he'd left the company. But telling that to the inspector was like telling the pope Jesus was Buddhist.

A lighter clicked. A fresh layer of cigar smoke overpowered the rotted smell that had been the first thing Gordie had disliked about the interview room.

He rolled, blinking into overhead lights.

The inspector was the size of a Frigidaire. Wrinkled stripes marked the back of his shirt. Pools of sweat ringed his armpits. His face absorbed the room's purple fluorescence as if he were a Mesopotamian stone idol, his eyes dead beads of shadow, his cheeks pockmarked like freshly laid asphalt.

A wooden table sat in the center of the room.

"Son," the inspector said, puffing on the stogie and squatting on a rickety chair. He ran a rag over his forehead. "This goddamned city sees ten goddamned murders every goddamned day. My job is to put a man in the hole for every goddamned asshole who gets himself chilled."

Blue smoke settled over Gordie like conformal coat on printed circuit.

"People feel safe if a man goes to the clink, see? And when people feel safe, they vote for my boss's boss's boss, unnerstand?" He pulled the cigar out of his mouth and examined the smoldering tip. "You're right about one thing, though. I ain't got nothing on you, and that means I got no choice but to let you go. Course, truth is I believe you. I don't think you done it. You ain't got the nerve."

Gordie nodded warily.

The inspector shoved the cigar into the corner of his mouth and leaned forward. The white skin of his neck bulged, making him look like a demonic beluga whale. "But, let me 'splain something. I don't give a rat's shit about that. Yulani Morav is dead, and her processor is clean as the governor's rap sheet. I need a perp, and I ain't fuckin' stupid. You and her used to do the dirty, you got ties. I figure a fancy-ass code grunge like you knows something about guys who are good at stripping processors. And since I *figure* you know something about it, you *best* know something about it, unnerstand? I get paid for putting guys in the hole—whether they're the right ones or not. Bring me something I can use, otherwise you're going down . . . even if I gotta make shit up."

If Gordie had learned anything in the last six hours, it was how not to argue with the inspector.

"You got two weeks."

Gordie first met Yulani in an arcade.

He was dressed in his brother's army shirt and a pair of ratty pants. His short hair left his face open. He and Stango had already sold a few Net games, and had just begun developing structure for what would later turn out to be optical push. They weren't rich but the money was beginning to flow, and it suited Gordie fine.

Yulani wore a yellow shirt that hugged her body. Dark lipstick made her face exotic, but she would have been just as stunning without it. She sat at an *Avenger* terminal, holding the controls with a light touch and molding herself into the game's cockpit. Her gaze was fixed on the wide concave screen where ninja aliens armed with nuclear grenades fell around her. She did the usual dodge routine, then threw everything she had against the group to the right.

It didn't work, of course.

She chewed her lip.

Her expression smoldered with black fire and her body arched with

frustration. Her wild scent was immediately memorable. For the first time Gordie wished he knew something about perfume.

"You shoulda taken out the middle pair," he said. "They're the leaders. Once they're gone you can handle the rest."

"Like you would know." Her accent was eastern bloc.

"Ought to." Gordie leaned over the cockpit with a grandiose smirk. "I programmed the damned thing."

Her gaze softened into a real smile. "I'm Yulani Morav," she said, extending her hand over the cockpit's edge. "I work for the guy who bought the damned thing."

Check and mate.

They went to the burger joint across the hallway. She ate like a prospector, pushing individual fries around to find the best ones and leaving the rest behind.

He talked about meeting Stango for the first time, how he blew the Brit away with a multilevel fractal encryption scheme. Stango was already a legend in code circles back then; he was still living in London, but had made it across the pond to present ideas at the more prestigious gak-cons. Stango was a few years older than Gordie, but they hit it off perfectly.

He talked about *Avenger*, how Stango hadn't been able to overcome the single-screen interface until Gordie developed the concave shell. He was surprised to find himself telling her how money changed things for them, and how they were working on something even bigger. He talked too much, probably, but Yulani seemed interested and once he started he found he didn't want to stop. She was beautiful, smiling quickly and speaking in her thick voice that roused his animal instinct with every syllable.

Finally, he asked for her node. Her card was gray stock emblazoned with the logo for Cassetti Tech. "Yulani Morav, Investment Manager," the card read.

"I'll be damned," Gordie said with a sheepish grin.

"What?"

"I figured you were lying when you said you worked for the guys that bought *Avenger*."

Her gaze flared with photoelectric charge. "I never lie about business, Gordie."

She left Cassetti a week later.

From that point on, their roles were set. Stango was the visionary with a fountain of ideas that never stopped. Gordie was the plant-your-butt-in-the-chair production coder. Yulani was the tech-girl publicist who charmed cash from Scrooge and left him feeling better for it, the woman whose face graced a thousand zines and still left people wanting more.

Since she had no money to speak of, Yulani moved in with Gordie.

For the first time, he had something to look forward to at home. They talked. They watched movies and ate pizza. They made love late into the night or in the afternoon or in the morning, sleeping in small snippets, waking up to go to work or to grab something to eat or to make love again. Gordie worked like a dog, eighteen, sometimes twenty hours at a crack. But time warped when they were together. Days and nights merged into single breathless moments that passed like overhot afternoons.

He had never been happier.

Then she sold optical push and could afford her own place.

Only when she was gone did Gordie notice the vacuum that surrounded her. Everything they had done had been about him, what *he* wanted, what *he* did, where *he* planned to go. Her ability to focus on other people made her good at what she did, but it was also a shield, a barrier that obscured things she didn't want revealed, a firewall that let her steer clear of discussions that turned to families and life in the past.

Gordie thought he had loved Yulani from the moment they first met, but he came eventually to realize that he'd never really known her.

Her kiss was hot, her body volcano warm. Her skin slipped over his, breast to chest, their legs entangled, the sound of breathing an entity filling the space between them. His body was iron on fire, his muscles strained.

He laid her back.

Her eyes turned quavering silver, imploding, skin flaking, lush hair twisting, breaking, strands writhing like black mambas. Gordie lurched from his sleep. *The brown boot. Whumpf.* His ribs flared with pain. Razor blades slashed his lower lumbar. He groaned.

The room was black.

Cold sweat drenched his chest.

Familiar things hid in indigo shadows: his cold and empty bed, the dresser with a drawer missing, a hard-backed chair, and an image of the Eiffel Tower at midnight. Mrs. Kale's last contractor had painted over the closed window, giving the place a cryptlike staleness. Moonlight was a dabbed spot upon the cotton drapes.

His life had been built around a machine that knew nothing but simple arrangements of 1s and 0s, binary strings fed into processors that, in turn, interpreted those strings into commands and actions. A one meant something was there, active and current. One returns "true."

Zero "false."

Real life had a different scheme.

He shivered at his nightmare. Part of it *had* happened. She had touched him before. She had once lain in the bed he lay on now. The thought made him feel better somehow. He swung his feet to the floor and took a deep breath. Four tabs had done nothing to quell the full-body ache the inspector's interrogation had left behind. The floor chilled the soles of his feet. The bed smelled of clammy sweat. The wall read quarter till midnight.

Gordie pulled on a pair of pants.

He couldn't grasp that she was gone. No, not gone—gone was what you were when you stepped out for a beer or a sandwich or to grab a walk. Yulani Morav was dead.

Christ. He rubbed the back of his neck.

She had been out of his life for almost a year, but the idea of Yulani being . . . not alive . . . felt wrong in a place so deep he was afraid to touch it. He still loved her, of course. He couldn't help it. All he had really learned since he'd left the company was that pretending she didn't exist didn't make it so.

He had scoured the Nets most of the evening, but hadn't found anything new. Every story was similar.

At approximately 7:15 in the morning of July 26, a woman identified as Yulani Morav, age twenty-nine, was found dead behind Barbertown Pub and Eatery. Details as to the cause of death were not immediately available, but the police are investigating the incident as a homicide.

Spare and meaningless.

Gordie stared at his dark apartment, steeling himself against a blow he felt coming yet could not see. The sensation ate at his nerves, but gave him an odd sense of strength at the same time.

Two weeks. The inspector wanted a killer. Fair enough.

Gordie knew where Stango would be.

Might as well get it over with.

The evening was unusually cool for midsummer. Midnight traffic rushed by as Gordie strode gingerly along the downtown sidewalks. He hated this place. Hated the buildings and the traffic, hated the clattering crescendo of fingers over portable keyboards that came from the gathering of software engineers who lined the streets and yanked code onto microblocks, hoping vainly to snatch a quick buck or, better even, an interview with someone important.

"This'll get you into PussyDeep," a kid said, pushing a cube into his face. "Only twenty bucks."

"No, thanks," Gordie said, shrugging and moving forward.

"Got a demo with Susi Yasgaran," the next guy said. "Totally nude. Do anything you want. For an extra five I'll even take off the fetish block."

Gordie pushed through.

The heyday of Silicon Valley, home of the teenage billionaire and the corporate merger, was long-gone history. Reality was streets filled with bleary-eyed coders whose careers had flamed out in the scalding heat of early Net development. Some still made it, of course. But for every one of them, hundreds like these lined the sidewalks.

He walked into the Gig, the huge nightclub Stango had bought after they'd sold optical.

The wall of heat was as solid as the music—the Ripping Lions, Karish Morreau screeching out vocals with a voice like broken concrete on chalkboard. The smell of warm bodies, liquor, and damp napkins lay under a haze of cigarette smoke and cheap perfume. Gordie slipped between a guy whose muscles bulged under a skin-tight body shirt and a girl with straight bangs and thick lipstick. She smoked a Conga, holding its long black form like a dart between her fingers and blowing a blue cone toward the ceiling.

"Long time, Gordie," the guy said.

"Too long," he yelled over the disjointed guitar line to "I'm the One."

The building had been a football-field-sized warehouse before Stango had bought it. It was oblong with odd nooks and crannies built into it.

"Seen Stango?" Gordie yelled.

The man cocked his head toward the stage.

The band leaped around under purple lighting.

A girl danced in a three-quarters-height cube mounted halfway up the wall, undulating with the music, her hands and feet pressed against the cube walls, her skin painted with fluorescent blue glitter, and her thong an electric pink. Green lips mouthed lyrics like a pair of jacked glowworms.

Stango sat in the harsh shadow of an amplifier that carried the pounding sound of Danny Ortega's bass. Dark sunglasses covered his eyes. His shoulders were slight beneath a silk jacket the same blue-sheened color as the shadows. As always, a half-empty glass sat before him.

Gordie had never known Stango to touch the stuff, but appearances were everything. The younger man edged through the crush and sat down gingerly. No reaction.

Stango was probably multiprocessing, checking databases and his usual contacts to trace where Gordie had come from. His silhouette hadn't changed. His nose was sharp and curved, and his British jawline could have been chiseled from white marble. His high forehead, with its dark hairline receding, gave him an air of superiority that Gordie knew so well.

The amplifier drilled caves of sound into Gordie's brain. He clenched his jaw to keep his teeth from rattling. For the first time in months, he wanted a cigarette.

Finally the violence on stage peaked. The table shook. Karish screamed. The lights went to black.

The audience whooped and hollered for more.

House music kicked in, and the walls rolled with blue and green lights, calming colors subliminally enhanced to lead people toward the joint's six bars. Stango twisted the base of his glass with long, crablike fingers. An image crossed Gordie's mind, *those same long fingers skittering across a keyboard*, a memory from when they had worked together in cramped rooms with shitty ventilation. Stango was Marc Chagall back then, throwing code down in surrealistic visions for Gordie to make happen in the sloppy world of half-baked interfaces and hacked-up protocols.

Gordie wondered if the memory was his own or if Stango had pushed it to him. If it *was* Stango's work, he wondered, was his old friend trying to make him nostalgic or merely remorseful?

Music swirled from every direction.

"I knew you would come back," Stango said, still facing the stage.

"Yulani's dead," Gordie replied.

Stango nodded, his lips turned sourly downward.

"I need your help," Gordie said.

Stango laughed out loud. "Shit."

"Cops think I know something about it, Stango. And if they think I know something, you can bet your ass they think you do, too. You'll listen if you know what's good for you."

Stango faced Gordie squarely. His breath reeked of alcohol. "You got a lot of fucking nerve coming in here and talking like that. *You'll listen if you know what's good for you.* Jesus fucking Christ. Here I thought you were gonna say you wanted to code again, and instead you sit there wagging your skinny-ass finger in my face."

The black holes of Stango's sunglasses writhed with images of dragons and snakes.

"Cut the pseudos, Stango. You owe me that much."

"You left *me*. I don't owe you shit," he replied.

"You know better than that."

The dragons faded as Stango sipped his drink.

"Why did you do it?" Gordie said, both of them knowing what he meant.

"She came on to me, man. Her fault."

Gordie sat quietly. Music pounded.

Stango squirmed like he needed to take a leak. "What Yulani wanted, Yulani got."

"She was mine."

Stango nearly choked. "If you thought she belonged to anyone, you were sadly mistaken."

"I loved her."

"I'm very sorry for you."

He shouldn't have come, Gordie realized.

He had cleared his life of everything that had to do with code. It was easier that way, simpler. But the sounds and sights of colors doing riffs on bodies and walls projecting images brought everything back. He felt the programming behind every effect, smelled interfaces and data flows. The hair on his arms tingled with the gritty symmetry of bracketed code blocks and elegant function calls.

"I spent the entire day with our friendly police force," he finally said.

"They don't know what they're dealing with." Stango raised his glass, then stopped and merely spun it in a wet circle. The black voids of his sunglasses hid any emotion that might be riding his face. "Neither do you."

"What does that mean?"

Stango's shrug was noncommittal arrogance. "What part didn't you catch?"

"I see you haven't lost your flair for the dramatic."

No response.

"I need your help," Gordie said, ashamed of the despair embedded in his voice. "The cops will pin this on me if I don't find them something else."

Four men, obviously Stango's goons, emerged from the darkness, tall guys with shaved heads and thick chests plodding forward like lobotomized gorillas bent on escorting him back to the street. Only two were real, but the pseudos were good, and if Gordie hadn't been straight and known precisely what he was looking for he would never have tagged them.

"Don't do this, man," he said, his gaze snapping back to Stango. "I'm sorry I left. But you got your interface, right? Shit, Stango. You're rich because of me."

Stango said nothing.

It was over. Gordie stood. His chair gave a metallic stutter as it gouged the floor. The pressure of a thousand gazes fell on him. Still Stango said nothing. Embarrassed, Gordie turned and shouldered past the bouncers, aiming for the pseudo in the middle and steeling himself against showing surprise as he passed through it.

Instead, the entirety of his body struck something heavy. The pseudo recoiled stiffly.

Gordie's jaw gaped. This *was* a pseudo, a digital mirage piped into the processor at the base of his brain. It wasn't supposed to have any substance. Gordie touched the pseudo's shoulder. It was firm, too firm, actually, hard like wood grain rather than thick and fleshy, not realistic at all but passable in the bar's darkness and a hell of a first step.

"You've got tactiles?" Gordie said, turning to Stango with undisguised wonder.

Stango gave a snort that stripped the years away, laughing at the expression of raw desire on Gordie's face. "Still quick as ever, I see." He dismissed the bouncers with a wave of his hand that let Gordie know he had summoned them merely to show off. Stango had always had a sadistic sense of the dramatic.

And now he had tactiles.

Full neurological push.

Despite the dark glasses, Gordie could picture Stango's pupils lacing holes through him. *It's hot shit, isn't it*, that gaze had always said. *It's hot shit, and we're gonna get rich.*

"Show me," Gordie said, ignoring the warning signals going off around him.

The downstairs hallway smelled of old dust.

Stango walked with a stride that reminded Gordie of a sandpiper's jaunt across flat beach. They were under the club, in the quiet comfort of Stango's offices. The walls were freshly white. Framed posters of games they had coded and advertisement campaigns for companies they had started broke the space. A carpet of blue berber absorbed their footsteps.

Gordie saw no sensory projectors here—no local pseudos. Stango wasn't above pushing images remotely, though, and walls were an easy cover.

Crystalline beads dangled over the open doorway at the end of the hall. Perhaps these were imaging systems, he thought. Maybe Gordie had underestimated Stango once again. Lights snapped on as they pushed through the strands.

The room was huge.

A bank of processing units lined the far wall. Green and yellow lights flickered from their consoles. A flat panel above the boxes scrolled with reports of the system's status. Smaller stations were positioned around the room. A dead Net terminal sat in one corner, its power cable looped in electronic isolation.

And, of course, there were the beanbag chairs—fifteen or twenty of them in rainbow variety scattered around the room. For a single, breathtaking moment Gordie saw Yulani sprawled over the big red one, feet propped against the wall, hair flowing to the floor as she closed her eyes, chewed her gum, and concentrated on a problem.

He remembered one other time, too.

It was past midnight.

Gordie had gone home. He was tired, but his brain was stuck on a bug in the optical switch and couldn't stop. The answer hit with full force right in the middle of a swig of Orlando orange juice straight from the jug.

He parked his car in the darkness. The office light was on, so he tried to

stay quiet as he went upstairs, not wanting to interrupt Stango's thought pattern.

He pushed the door.

There they were, Yulani and Stango, naked and intertwined, right on the beanbags.

If Stango saw Gordie's hesitation, he didn't show it. Instead, he pressed his hand against a wall display. A light flickered. Something clicked. Dataflows appeared, snippets of pseudocode and node annotations that diagrammed Stango's thoughts.

A central processing core and a series of channels led to virtual switches and connectors. The output was easy, pretty much unchanged from how Gordie had left it. A switch latched to the optic nerve to create a channel. Once toggled, the processor intercepted visual signals, modified them, then piped data as a stream of electrical charges directly to the brain. This technology, and the image-processing code Gordie had written, was the idea that had made them both rich.

Full tactiles had always been a possible next step in theory.

Practice, however, was different.

Optical push worked because the optic nerve was easily available. It dealt with only a single nervous process, and a DNA-based nano could be configured to handle the link. Full tactiles required the programmer to understand every nerve and have the ability to configure builder nanos to the exact nature of the host. Very tricky, and very deadly if done poorly.

"Where do you personalize the system?" Gordie asked.

Stango removed his sunglasses. His eyes sparkled and he grinned wryly.

"Here," he said, pressing his palm against the central logic driver to expand its diagram. "You need to go virtch to see the multidimensional detail, but this gives you the basic idea."

Gordie scanned the cell's encapsulated algorithm. The interface was generic. I/O routines to preprocess information, context scripts, driver logic. All the usual stuff taught in every comsci school on the planet. Then he found it. He had to step back to take it all in, but he saw search routines and sensory inputs, a series of self-configuring initialization files, and an interface back into the host's primary processor and memory storage routines.

"It's a configuration driver," Gordie said.

"Uh-huh."

"It scans the nervous system, takes feedback from the host, then creates and loads a unique driver for every element it finds."

Stango nodded.

"Plug-n-play at the most complex level imaginable," Gordie continued.

"An oldie, but a goodie," Stango replied.

"It's fucking incredible, is what it is."

Gordie opened another level, examining how the data fit together. As always, Stango's code was bold and flashy, full of vision but sloppy and frayed when it got to the details of its interface.

He felt the itch stronger than ever. It was an odor, indescribable, the shallow breathing of total concentration, the mind buzz of immersion. He hadn't coded since the Cretaceous, but already Gordie found a place

where the interface would hang, already his fingers ached to get in and mold this code.

"Why are you showing me this?"

The look crossed Stango's face again. *It's hot shit, isn't it?* "This is what Yulani was selling."

The mention of her name was cold water in Gordie's face.

"Was she running it, too?"

The hot-shit expression faded. "Only a partial proto, but enough to make for a good sales pitch."

Gordie thought back to the pseudo from the club.

"Shit, Stango."

"What?"

"I'm running it, too, aren't I?"

Stango grinned. "I slipped it past your dog when you sat down."

Gordie's heart clocked up. A watchdog was a standard piece of code resident in brainstem processors that continually scanned memory space presumed empty under the assumption that virulent code would take up this space. When the dog found anything of concern, it activated a series of inoculation agents—programs to help clear the problem.

A programmer could sidestep a dog, though, by building a table of false pointers and tricking all but the most sophisticated routines into thinking that memory space was clean.

Which is exactly what Stango had done to him.

Yulani was dead, and if Stango slipped him the same code, then he was in danger, too.

His face flushed with the thought.

"Come on, Gordie. I wouldn't do that to you no matter how much shit we've been through. It's not like that."

"Not like what?"

"The code didn't kill her. You can dump it anytime you want. Just slip out and dump the files."

Gordie's fingertips absently rubbed his elbow. "Tactiles could do it, you know? You could simulate an attack, or about anything else. The right command to the nervous system could make the host's body tear itself apart."

"I'm telling you, man, that's not it." Stango threw himself on a beanbag chair. "I mean, maybe the code *did* kill her, but not like you're thinking."

Gordie raised an eyebrow, but Stango pressed on.

"Yulani presold the system to ImagineIsland, you know? Just like optical."

ImagineIsland was a huge amusement park, complete with virtch games and rides that totally annihilated even Gordie's imagination. They had been a natural mark for optical push, and Yulani played them for a sweet package well before the code had ever actually run.

"This is a helluva lot bigger than ImagineIsland, Stango. You get full tactiles and you can . . ."

Can what? Gordie thought. Full tactiles meant the coder could shape reality, embed physical things in the mind of the viewer. The possibilities were scary as hell. Gordie immediately pictured representatives of every

spook agency on the planet lining up outside Stango's door, complete with sunglasses and briefcases crammed with cash.

"Shit," Gordie said in a whisper.

Stango's smile stretched across his face and his eyes gleamed like they were on fire.

"So she sold while you coded. What's the problem?"

"Pick a directory."

Gordie pressed a node. There were just short of a thousand files, far less than a full neurosystem would require. "You're not done."

"And what's there isn't ready. It locks and hangs, and leaves people in mindspace until it gets a reset."

Gordie chewed the inside of his cheek, glancing sidewise at Stango. They both knew what the problem was. Stango was out of his element with production code and the nuances of interface construction. Yet, he had always been uncomfortable letting anyone else touch his ideas. It had taken Gordie a year to gain his trust, and after their clash it surprised him not one bit that Stango was working alone.

"When was it due?"

"Two months ago."

"The entire package?"

"Yes."

"So, that means the prototype shell is what, four months late?"

"More like five."

"Shit."

Billions of dollars were at stake by now, and investors probably clamoring for heads. ImagineIsland was huge in itself, but it, in turn, was owned by DigiCorp Markets, the largest conglomerate on the globe and a group known to be unpleasant when things got rough. Gordie had had some exposure to how things worked in the corporate environment, and this idea was big enough that he smelled DigiCorp's fingerprints all over the deal.

"I bet DigiCorp is ready to piss their pants."

"I need your help," Stango said. "I need you to code this interface."

This time it was Gordie who laughed. "That's a good one."

"Don't you see it, Gordie? DigiCorp killed Yulani as a message. They'll kill me, too, if I don't deliver the system in the next three months."

"You're kidding me, right?"

Stango's gaze raised hackles along Gordie's neck. "You need to find who killed Yulani. I'm telling you it was DigiCorp. I need to deliver a working package. You make it work, I give you a connection."

Despite himself, Gordie grinned. "It'll never be done in time."

"You could do it."

He shook his head. "I don't code anymore."

Stango slipped back into the mask of bravado Gordie had admired so much as a kid. "Then I suggest you consider what a lifetime in jail will be like."

The image of the inspector's brown boot reminded Gordie of why he was here. His ribs throbbed. Stango was right. What other choice did he have?

"Can you get me into DigiCorp in less than two weeks?"

"You get the interface working well enough to show, and we'll have a meeting the next day."

Gordie chewed his lower lip and checked the time stamp.

"It's Friday today. Saturday, actually. Tell DigiCorp I'll have something by this time next week."

"Are you sure? My ass is toast if I bring them in before you're ready."

"It's not your ass I'm worried about, Stango. I need time to work through their system. Either you get them in here this time next week, or I suggest you consider what DigiCorp might do if you don't have a system."

Stango grinned like a kid caught with candy in his mouth.

"You got a deal," he said.

The list of DigiCorp contacts sat on Gordie's machine, taunting him to get started. Gordie had spent most of his high school career cracking security systems, a process that taught him how unwise it was to play the game halfway. Just the idea of confronting a conglomerate as large as DigiCorp Marketing gave Gordie a string of hives. DigiCorp was an amorphous blob like millions of lines of code jumbled into a jigsaw puzzle with no picture to guide him. If what Stango said about their involvement in Yulani's death was true, they could make the inspector's boot look like a joy ride at ImagineIsland.

The idea of slipping past their firewall sent spiders crawling up his neck.

So the first thing Gordie did was to ignore the list and get to work on the interface. Getting it to perform was the most important thing right now, anyway.

He dropped a virtch into Stango's design space and ran multidimensions alongside the configuration code. It had been a very long time. Invisible sheets of rust flaked off his mindspace with a sensation like skin peeling.

Stango's code was ugly; there was just no other word for it. Each routine was a unique piece of thought, the whole woven together to form a glob that would bend and break under constant use. To survive for any length of time the framework for data systems had to be more like the undergirders of a bridge. Stable code was all about consistency and syntax, elegant calls and pure form, error handlers that landed softly—and, yes, damn it, brackets with standard tabs. A bridge was not always the sexiest of structures, but the good ones used symmetry and redundancy. Their beauty lay in repetition, and they always got people from point A to point B.

Gordie found the switching mechanism that linked biological nerves to the processing core. This was the foundation. He ran his hands along the data flow, shifting to view 25-space so he could look at the nano driver. His code from so long ago was unchanged here. Not surprising—it was damned good work.

A red icon flashed in his view.

"Hey," the icon said in Gordie's own voice. "You've found the primary optical switch. This is the real goods, okay? It's also my code. You can't have it. Don't worry yourself any, though. If you're good enough to get here, you're good enough to write your own damned routine, okay?"

He smiled.

He had written this copyright routine right after discovering how to make the thing work, and the “condescending asshole” tone of success colored his voice like butter on toast.

Gordie’s virtch rose through the interface. Code floated around him like a kelp sea. He felt the almost physical scrub of their binaries. It *had* been a very long time.

A month retailing, three months in a desk job with a design company, another six working with hardware gaks, a month hiking the mountains in Tennessee where his dad had once been a small-time banker and his mom had sold real estate.

None of this had suited him.

He was a code jockey. He always had been, and now—floating among visual representations of thought, weaving through function calls and virtual pointers and pieces of audio that hummed and creaked like hulls of old ships at the bottom of the ocean—Gordie saw that he always would be.

All this was his, now.

His code.

His world.

He breathed it in, feeling ones and zeros scour his lungs, imagining oily silicate clouds of digital smoke as he exhaled. Somewhere in his cerebral cortex, Gordie’s brain churned—and at that moment, a plan formed without conscious thought.

Maybe he wouldn’t need to confront DigiCorp at all.

He should have thought of it earlier, but wasn’t that the way of all ideas? Stango could get him into contact with DigiCorp—true. But after what Stango had done with Yulani, Gordie would never really trust him again.

The coroner’s office had autopsy records, though. He could probably even find medical records if he dug around a little. And, maybe the news-nets would unearth additional information over the next couple of days. Those were straightforward hacks with a lot less risk. The idea of putting off his assault on DigiCorp’s security system was as welcome as hot chocolate in December.

The autopsy report said Yulani suffered a massive heart attack, probably induced by a genetically weak valve.

Gordie didn’t buy it, and his still tender ribs reinforced the idea that the inspector wouldn’t either. Internal processors don’t get wiped by accident. The inspector was like every venture capitalist Gordie had met: a man as interested in defeating people as he was in winning the game. He wouldn’t be buying shares in the “natural causes” answer anytime soon.

So, Gordie slipped his virtch back into the data stream and found storage for Yulani’s doctor. The doctor used a Caffee key for security, code over five years old. Even now most companies weren’t truly data conscious. If he had seen it once he had seen it a thousand times: A business bought security, then didn’t keep it up-to-date.

His virtch played a quick game of “Match the Key,” then found Yulani’s records.

Unlike Stango’s design space, this was a visual only. Taking his time to

ensure he didn't leave anything behind, he ran data through various open and proprietary text readers. It was the ZerenBook that eventually gave him what he needed.

Yulani's records included notes about colds and shots. Blood scans. Pap smears. Tests. Genetic studies. Even an entry that indicated she had once miscarried. His heart tugged at that one. Unable to stop himself he checked the date, saw it was well before his time, then realized he didn't know how he felt about that.

Nothing about Yulani ever came easily.

He found nothing to indicate she might have had a weak heart.

Not a thing.

Convinced he could learn nothing else, Gordie slipped his virtch out of the stream and closed her records.

It was late.

His head hurt, and the inside of his mouth felt like it was coated with cotton. All-nighters didn't used to take so much out of him. He was getting old. He rubbed his temples and stared out the window. The night was like a brand-new dollar bill, crisply dark, perfect and unwrinkled. A full moon gave the street harsh edges. Old phone wire hung like outdated clothes; round-fendered cars parked like beached whales; a single street-lamp spread a sodium cone in the distance.

He could do better than this dump, he supposed. Optical push had left Gordie in pretty good shape when he'd quit the company, and he'd probably never have to work again if he didn't want to. But he liked the anonymity of this place.

The ability to hide amid the average gave him comfort.

Stango, wearing a dark blue suit with a faint weave of gold striping, sat at the head of an oblong table. He twirled a quarter in his fingers, twisting it and letting it slide from between his thumb and index finger to between his ring finger and pinkie. A projection screen ran with 3D animation that served as the entry into his presentation. Inch-thick carpet muffled sound. Insulated walls added to the pall, eggshell white and lined with alternating splash images of turquoise and blue—the colors of success recommended by every advertising agency on the globe.

Colors Yulani had often used, Gordie thought as he waited.

The coin flashed and glinted as Stango worked it. His spindle-thin fingers moved like a black widow incessantly working her web.

"They're late."

Gordie accessed the time. Two-oh-nine in the afternoon.

"Negotiating tactic," he replied. "They want you to sweat."

"Well, they're getting their wish."

Gordie was more concerned than usual, too. His role in these types of meetings had always been the trusty gak sidekick to Stango's business vision. He was never intended to be the center of attention, so he could vent his nerves more directly, breathing deeply or running his hands over the arms of his chair.

But today he was hunting a murderer. He had no option but to dig into DigiCorp, and today was the day.

Six people from DigiCorp stepped into the room, most placing wireless clients on the table. The room beeped with wake-up alerts. Chairs squeaked.

Stango cleared his throat and spoke. "Good afternoon. Before I get started, let me introduce you to Gordon Rath. He's a longtime friend, and the man whose work has brought the product a long way since you last saw it."

It was strange to hear Stango call him by his full name. Faces around the room focused on Gordie. The leader of the collective spoke. She was a woman of forty-five or so with swept-back ash-blonde hair and conservative makeup, her lips crisply darkened with a maroon tone.

"Good afternoon, Gordon. I'm Salee Taggart, vice president of corporate operations at DigiCorp Marketing." She turned to the slight man at her left. "This is Harold McIntyre. He's the ImagineIsland program manager. I'm sure I speak for him when I say we both look forward to seeing what you've done."

McIntyre nodded. His face was thin and pinched, his nose small and hooked downward. He wore a tan suit with a bow tie and an off-white shirt underneath. His hands were older than the rest of him, covered with skin that bunched up at the knuckles and was beginning to show age marks.

In-house retired, Gordie thought as he returned the nod. Any doubts about whether DigiCorp had taken the project over from ImagineIsland were now dispelled. His stomach twisted with memories of how the process of selling optical push had felt so grimy, sitting through the river of oblivious executives that flowed through the office and spoke in tones that always seemed lighthearted and jovial at first, but only ended up sounding contrived and condescending. He had never wanted to work for a big company, and now he remembered exactly why.

"Gordie was with me when we developed optical," Stango continued on. "He's the real deal."

A man who had taken a seat against the wall—away from the table—stared at Gordie with an expression like a fan's sweep in August, light but obviously there, fleeting and startlingly cool. He was a kid, really, maybe just out of college—or maybe hadn't even gone. He sat on his chair at a crooked angle, wearing a sport coat three sizes too big over a black T-shirt and a rack-thin body. His arm levered over the adjoining chair like a piece of loose siding. His skin was white paste. A handful of bronze-black hair fell over his forehead like a pad of rusted steel wool. Looking as closely as he could without being rude, Gordie noticed silver glints of at least three jacks glimmering from under the kid's ear.

Hardwire connections.

He had heard of the practice, drilling mounts into the ridge of the skull to allow direct connection, hence avoiding the security overhead of wireless when a local connection was available. Early performance data said a direct connect pushed a terabyte a full four-hundredths faster than wireless. The idea of a direct jack to a brain-based processor, while by no means new, had fascinated him at first. But seeing the rings embedded in the neck of an actual person, and seeing the way the kid's eyes glimmered

with the same metallic flaring as the connections gave Gordie a sense of dread.

He had always been the one pushing the envelope.

Now this kid sat in their conference room with three gleaming hard-wire connections that screamed "Obsolete" into Gordie's ear as loudly as if it were a jet engine on full afterburner.

"So," Salee Taggart said. "What do you have for us today?"

Stango pointed to the display and began to speak. Everyone turned their attention to the screen, but Gordie's mind stayed with the kid.

Taggart had said his name was Will Darbringer, and that he was a consultant—another oddity that made Gordie uncomfortable. It wasn't unusual for a company to contract development, or to buy up code as it happened. But it *was* odd for a company with the reputation of DigiCorp to rely on a kid contractor for their technical expertise in a meeting like this.

Shaking his concern, Gordie forced himself to get to work.

He glanced at Salee Taggart.

The good thing about cracking the system of someone in the room was that it provided immediate feedback about a person's local dog. He still remembered sitting in Mrs. Pauli's English Language class and seeing the glimmering red light flashing inside her cornea. He managed to slip away that time only because he noticed the problem visually before her dog routine could catch him.

The downside, of course, was one of concentration. Splitting focus—half on the virtch, half on physical place—could lead to embarrassing gaffes.

Without further hesitation, he rode the wireless directly into Salee Taggart's memory space. He immediately built a virtual table to protect against the watchdog scan, and was relieved to see Taggart give no indication that she was aware of an intruder.

Stango finished the introductory portion of his pitch.

"That's good and fine," Taggart said, leaning forward crisply. "But we all know the real issue here is schedule."

Room temperature dropped into January.

Stango cleared his throat.

Gordie's virtch slipped through layers of locked code, swapping keys and overriding password routines. Finally, her system was open. Her files were bucketed in clean, easy-to-follow logic that rarely required more than a handful of objects to be stored in any single place. A series of relational linking routines gave her access to this information from a variety of thought mechanisms. Financial records and business reports sat in a breakout structure. Project briefs sat in a different framework. Her personnel commentary was accessible through any portion of the framework. If her data retrieval system was any indicator, Salee Taggart had risen through DigiCorp's structure by being intelligent, ordered, and under control.

Gordie's virtch marked data buckets for extraction and toggled an execution bit from 0 to a 1 so that his extraction routine would run. Then he slipped out of Taggart's system. The results would be waiting for him later.

"We're working our way back to schedule," Stango said, his eyes wide and his jawline firmly set. "Gordie's got the interface working in a good

third of the modules, and has been knocking them off at a clip of twenty or so a day."

"The target you agreed to is a fully operational system two months from now," Harold McIntyre said with blustery impatience.

Taggart ignored McIntyre, but added nothing. She merely folded her hands under her chin and waited for Stango to reply.

This is where Yulani had once earned her money. She could handle the heat. She would have looked the tiger in the eye and somehow managed to emerge with even more than her fair share of meat.

"That's right," Stango said, clearing his throat. "Two months was the agreed upon date."

Taggart's words were a guillotine blade poised overhead. "Can you finish by the deadline?"

Gordie piped up, his concentration fully on the moment. "I see no reason why not."

"You've got thousands of routines to sort out," Taggart said.

Gordie stood, calling a flow diagram to the screen. He ran his hand over the screen around data repositories. Will Darbringer edged slightly forward with a razor's gaze.

"I've taken an approach that groups neural functions into collections of various characteristics."

"You changed the interface," Will Darbringer said quietly from behind the group, his voice thin and reedy like a mouse's squeak.

"Yeah."

"The same code runs multiple sensors."

"Yes. That way there's less to go wrong. The interface should be more robust and reliable."

"I see," Taggart said.

"I can't imagine we'll see the same functionality," Darbringer added.

"Why do you say that?" Gordie challenged.

"It'll mess up the visual component. Driving an arm's movement with a routine designed for a leg won't result in a smooth motion."

Every eye in the room was on Gordie. Sweat welled up through his armpits and a film formed on his forehead. Stango stood silently to the side of the room.

"I changed that paradigm, too. If you look at the body's movement from a pure interface standpoint—at a higher order of abstraction—nerves don't do anything but command muscles on and off, and the muscles either contract or don't. In the end, the goal is to either abduct or adduct a body part."

"You're characterizing types of component motion rather than individual systems' contribution to it," Darbringer said.

"Yep. Pretty much the same way game designers worked until bandwidth caught up with them."

Darbringer sat back, nodding. "That's a different interface," he whispered to himself, but the sentence rasped across the room with the sound of dry snakeskin rubbing. "Totally different."

"So, now you can see why I think we'll make the target dates," Stango said as he emerged from the corner of the room again.

Heads nodded.

Gordie sat down and tried not to hyperventilate.

The meeting went on, DigiCorp management expressing reserved optimism by its end.

But Gordie felt a presence here that he hadn't felt before. He noted that the kid's gaze continued to slide his way. There was something about Darbringer he didn't like. Maybe it was that he reminded Gordie of himself ten years before, brash and completely lacking in fear.

Darbringer cast him a glance that Gordie finally decided to interpret as deferential admiration.

Take that, kid. This old gak still has a trick or two left.

But still the kid's expression bothered him, and try as he might, he couldn't shake the image of those glittering dark eyes slicing through him like a cat's claw, cutting cleanly but not bleeding until sometime deeper in the future.

"You're not leaving now, are you?"

Stango's face seemed to move a thousand ways at once. He was high on success, riding a cloud that formed under his feet when Salee Taggart and the rest of the DigiCorp team had left the building. Gordie couldn't blame him. It isn't every day that a man's company is so obviously at stake, and certainly not every day that he lives to see it through.

"I'm beat, Stango. I'll get back into it in the morning."

"We've got a deadline, man. Time to go into overclock."

Gordie shrugged. The data from his scan of Taggart's system should be packaged up and waiting for him when he got home. He had other things to do.

"*Mañana*, Stango. *Mañana*," he said, waving wearily and turning to head for home.

The content of Salee Taggart's data was as ordered as the framework it had been housed in. She used language with a sparseness that left little room for interpretation. Still, he couldn't believe what was there.

The wall clock read 1:05 in the morning.

There was no moon outside the windows of his apartment. He was drained and frayed, worn out from sleeping only four of the past forty-eight hours. The air in his room was still and listless as if it, too, was ready for him to turn in. But he had to finish this now. Had to make sure he was right.

The facts were laid out in concise Salee Taggart precision.

DigiCorp had *wanted* Stango, and now Gordie, to miss their date. They had plans in place, money set aside in legal department budget lines. The contract had performance targets defined. Once Stango missed his date they planned to close in and take the company from him.

But that didn't make sense. Why throw millions of dollars to develop tactile push, then work to see it fail? Why buy a company whose product didn't work well enough to market?

A warning buzzer hummed in his ear.

A light flashed red in the corner of his sight.

After Stango had such an easy time slipping through his watchdog, Gordie had customized it in a hundred different ways. Now it had found an intruder who hadn't anticipated correctly, and Gordie understood immediately what that meant. There was no coincidence in code circles—no such thing as random error. He knew who was at the heart of this without needing to trace the code, knew without having to recall the way Will Darbringer's eyes had studied him as he walked out the meeting room's doorway. A DigiCorp virtch had landed in his memory space and was at that very instant spawning a series of action agents to do who knew what.

The warnings set off a chain reaction. Functions called functions, which in turn called more functions. Data paths closed inside Gordie's processor. Control loops passed parameters to code blocks that shut down interfaces.

He lost his display feedback and the warning light faded away.

In the milliseconds it took to power-off these secondary systems, every molecule in his body seemed to vibrate as a separate entity, and in that same time Gordie finally understood just how much was at stake. If his code wasn't airtight, if he had left a hole, he would end up dead and cold, laid out on a stainless-steel autopsy table just as Yulani had been. Every frayed piece of his code rubbed against his memory like ragged burlap, every loop and switch and return, places where extra clock cycles could have been sliced from the logic if he had been more diligent. There was no such thing as perfect code, only levels of elegance defined by a minimalist lack of keystrokes and shortness of execution cycles.

He thought of Will Darbringer and his three shining direct connects.

A sound came from his doorstep, thin and metallic, the discordant scrape of metal inside a lock. Someone to take care of the remains? Someone to drive him out to some obscure place like they had Yulani?

But Gordie wasn't dead yet.

His body moved as if on autopilot. An umbrella was propped against the wall beside the closet. He grabbed it and held it in one hand like a club.

"Who's there?"

The noise stopped.

Footsteps retreated hastily.

Gordie threw open the door in time to see a dark silhouette disappear between neighboring houses.

He took a step forward. It had rained earlier. The night air was soupy and smelled of damp earth. The streetlight bled yellow haze into the blackness. Footsteps echoed wetly. If Gordie didn't go now the intruder would get away. The empty room behind him beckoned with lighted comfort. Come here, it said. Come here and sit inside me and be safe. Come here and let the world do its ugliness by itself. Come here and just be.

And he wanted to go back. More than anything he could think of at that moment, he wanted that. But the footsteps echoed, and he saw the image of the inspector's boot.

He ran outside.

Darkness closed around him. Air clung to his lungs like a leech. Gordie's bare feet slapped against the concrete driveway as he followed the footsteps. The sound of crickets faded. His breathing rasped. The um-

brella handle was wooden, shellacked and hard and rounded, slick and warm in Gordie's hand.

Fear came as he ran.

Fear naked like falling, sharp like a wave crashing in the darkness. Fear like a horrific beast caged and starved for a hundred days let suddenly loose.

Yet there was no sound but the breathing in his lungs and the pounding in his heart.

The man was gone.

The code in Gordie's bioprocessor still ran.

An unidentified night bug screeched solitary defiance in the distance and Gordon Rath stood alone on someone else's dark driveway in the middle of a black August night, swinging an umbrella around him as though it were Don Quixote's sword.

Like most bursts of clarity in Gordie's life, the answer came when he wasn't thinking about it. It was obvious why DigiCorp wanted them to fail. Simple. It was not billions at stake here. More like trillions—multiples of the gross national product of more than half the nations around the world.

In the end, as always, it was all about the interface.

Yulani had probably seen it first.

She had most likely played hardball then, which was such a typical step for her that Gordie and Stango had once called upping the price in retaliation for a perceived business affront "the Morav Gambit."

Now, of course, Yulani Morav was dead.

And Gordie had no doubt as to who was responsible.

For the second time he pushed through a late-night door with Stango behind it.

"You gave them the goddamned interface, didn't you?"

He strode past Stango into a living room the size of a small auditorium. A pair of velour walk-in couches sat in the room's opposing corners, and a ceiling-mounted projector cast holographic images of dark landscapes across the wall. Stock prices glowed from a corner monitor, and a series of sensors blinked, sending fanned shafts of blue light throughout the room.

"Admit it. You gave them the fucking interface."

"What are you talking about?" Stango said, rubbing the side of his head in a sleepy stupor. His hair was mussed and he stood there in an oversize yellow T-shirt and a pair of underwear that hung from his ass.

"Who's there?" A woman's voice came from up a wide central staircase that led to an open doorway. Karish Morreau, the singer from the club, peered out of the darkness with her blonde hair straggling down her back. "Oh," she said. "Hi, Gordie."

"They came to my place tonight, Stango. They tried to get into my chip."

"Shit," Stango said in a slow, drawn-out breath as he shut the door behind him. "It's nearly four in the morning, Gordie. Can't this wait?"

"What happened, Stango? I want to know what happened to Yulani."

"She died," Stango said.

"That's not what I mean and you damn well know it. I should have been paying attention, but I was so keyed that I missed it. I should have known the minute that kid with the direct-connect crap hanging from his neck said I changed the interface, you know? He *knew*, Stango. He knew I changed the interface."

"So?"

"So!" Gordie could barely control his voice. "He couldn't have known that unless he saw the original. Yulani's chip was clean. She was taking a hard line with DigiCorp. They wanted the interface but they hadn't paid for it and she wouldn't give it to them. You did, and she ended up dead with a clean chip."

Stango bit his lip.

"What did they do?" Gordie growled, backing Stango up against the door, losing control, pressing a pointed finger into Stango's chest with every question mark and letting glorious pressure rise in his veins. "Did they threaten you? Did they promise to let you off the hook if you gave them the interface? Was it money? Was that it? Was it the fucking money, Stango?"

"Stop it, Gordie! Stop it."

Gordie paused, breathing raggedly. For the first time ever, Stango cowered before him. His eyes glittered. "What do you want me to say, Gordie? That I can't cut it without you? That I can't code? Do you want me to say I'm dog shit? What do you want?"

"What made you give them the goddamned interface?"

"We were behind schedule."

"And they gave you time."

Stango gave a self-conscious shrug.

"No?"

"They promised me they wouldn't code anything."

"Oh, Jesus fucking Christ, Stango. And you believed them?" But truth rode Stango's eyes like it was painted on. Scared truth. Defiant truth. He had always sought the spotlight, had always clung to the buzz around his ideas as if it were an invisible umbilical. For a moment, Gordie was almost sorry for him.

"It's my idea," Stango said, his gaze bold once again. "It should be my code."

"They killed Yulani with it. You know that, don't you? Without the interface they couldn't have touched her."

"I'm sorry."

"They're going to kill you, too."

"No. They won't."

"I've seen the records, asshole—memos and plans and everything else. DigiCorp can write their own code now. They won't stop until they own the system."

"They already do."

"What?" Now it was Gordie who was nonplussed.

Stango swallowed. "They offered me a deal an hour ago. As of now, I work for DigiCorp."

The news was a punch to his stomach. Gordie staggered backward, turning and walking into the dark living room to sit on the edge of one of the couches. He put his head in his hands and tried to think. Gordie's work had protected Stango. His new interface put a buffer between him and DigiCorp that they couldn't get through, so they had gone to Plan B and hired the enemy. It was slick, too slick, almost as if Stango had planned it from the very beginning.

"That means . . ."

And it was all suddenly so clear.

I got sources, the inspector had said back in the first hour of his interrogation, before things got ugly.

"You gave me to the cops," he muttered, lifting his gaze to Stango like liquid fire. "You needed help and knew I would come to you."

"If someone else had to code it, I wanted it to be you."

"You asshole."

"It's just business, Gordie."

Just business.

How often had he heard that phrase from Yulani's lips?

Gordie sat on the edge of one of the couches, feeling the bottom fall out of his world.

Stango stood in the open foyer, shrugging his shoulders, a pitiful, wretched little sot in his T-shirt and underwear. Karish had come halfway down the stairs, then retreated back to the shadows. "You're a code gak, man. Don't deny it. It's what you are. So you got what you needed; I got what I wanted. How was I to know they would tag you so hard?"

"Was Yulani business, too, Stango?"

"Only on her end."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Think about it, sport. She wouldn't have hurt you if she hadn't planned to get something for it."

Gordie nodded to himself, feeling like the world's most gullible asshole. Optical push was big money back then, and it had been behind schedule. Yulani couldn't have known Gordie would be there that night, but he would have happened upon them sometime. And she certainly understood that Gordie would be angry, and that he would respond by digging a hole into the code and pulling it in over himself.

The scene on Stango's wall changed to a dark sky.

She had been right.

Optical push came about because Gordie closed the interface. He closed the interface by pushing himself deeper into the code for three nonstop days after Yulani humiliated him. And Yulani humiliated him because she knew his anger would be focused, that he'd deliver the product.

Simple as that.

Just business.

"Who was she?" Gordie said.

"What do you mean?"

"What was her goddamned favorite color? Where did she like to eat? Did she put her shoes on the left of the closet or the right? What was her fucking birthday?"

"How the hell should I know, Gordie?"

Fatigue washed over him, his lack of sleep catching up in a slow wave. Of course Stango didn't know.

"Her favorite color was black," Gordie said through a throat that suddenly ached. *Her touch was velvet. Her hair was black and coarse, and felt like a dry river when I cupped her head in my hands.*

Stango said nothing.

"You didn't love her."

"She didn't know how to code."

Gordie thought to ask if she had loved him, but the answer was obvious. Yulani had never known how to love anyone.

"You're right," Gordie said. "I'm a fucking idiot."

"She didn't understand us."

There, Stango was wrong. Yulani had known Gordie better than he'd known himself. When it became obvious he wasn't going to reply, Stango cleared his throat.

"You'd best be leaving."

Gordie nodded, defeated in every way imaginable. He had no case for the inspector—no direct evidence, no clear-cut argument. Sure, he could add one and one, but DigiCorp wouldn't play on a level table. He saw that as clearly as he had seen the gleam of Darbringer's connections.

"DigiCorp came to my place after you signed the papers," he said. "I know too much. They won't stop until they kill me, will they?"

Stango gave a plaintive shrug.

Gordie walked to the doorway. He stopped and looked at Karish on the stairs.

"I hope you have a house full of pseudo kids."

He left then, his shoes echoing on concrete.

She appeared suddenly, filling the doorway, leaning against the wall with a welcome-home smile on her lips. The program was nearly perfect, feeding neurological activity to Gordie's brain and letting it process things that weren't really there. They were good visuals—skin dark and creased with shallow lines around her lips, her eyes glistening. She straightened and walked toward him, her movement leaving not the faintest trace of a ghost. She reached out, her hand soft like cloth against his skin.

Ones and zeros. That's all.

A computer knows nothing but ones and zeros.

Gordie grinned.

His first full neurological pseudo had been good enough to pass police inspection. Of course, a decent body temperature and occasional lifting of the chest in simulated breathing was about all that really took. But Gordie had spent time to make it move just like him, made certain it spoke with the right lilt to its phrasing.

The inspector hadn't cared one way or the other.

So the pseudo went to jail, projecting itself remotely through built-in processors and an interface Gordie continuously monitored over the course of his arrest.

DigiCorp was nothing if not predictable. Their virtch came the first night. It slipped through Gordie's interface, tripping the silent wire of code he had laid, bits passed to protocols, action routines passed from Gordie's host to his pseudo. As DigiCorp's virtch commanded Gordie's brain to tear itself a small hole, he piped the command stream to his pseudo. And the pseudo expired there in its cell, complete with the expulsion of a pseudo pound of feces that Gordie thought was so much more than appropriate.

The newsclip said Gordon Rath, thirty-five years old and a suspected killer of a young woman, died of a sudden aneurysm while asleep in his cell.

Yulani sat next to him on the couch and ran her hand over his forehead. They were in a small, unassuming living room with off-white walls and a bay window in the middle of an average neighborhood of box houses and vinyl awnings. He had moved his money around well enough that no one should be able to find it. He would be comfortable.

"What do you want to do?" Yulani said.

Gordie sat back and closed his eyes. He ran his hand over Yulani's denim-clad thigh. It was warm and firm and rasped with just the right sound of dry friction. She would love him, this Yulani. That much was true.

"I don't know," he said. "Why don't you tell me about Croatia?"

He listened as she began to speak. ○

FRANKENSTEIN vs. THE FLYING SQUIRRELS

Yeah, I know,
it should be *Frankenstein's Monster vs.
the Flying Squirrels*.



Most people call the monster
"Frankenstein,"
but Frankenstein was the scientist who
created the monster.

And what was the point, anyway?
What chance did flying squirrels have
against Frankenstein, or his monster,
even with the element of surprise?

—David Livingstone Clink



Carol Emshwiller tells us, "the novel that began with *World of No Return* (*Asimov's*, January 2006) is finished and will come out next year from Tachyon Publications. We have to change the name since, in the novel, they *do* return, but we haven't yet found one." Soon after the novel, Tachyon will also bring out another collection of Carol's short stories. In her spooky new tale for *Asimov's*, the author takes a close look at the surprising elements that go into the psychological makeup of . . .

THE SEDUCER

Carol Emshwiller

I have always been a seducer . . . ever since I was a little boy. I was an ugly child and have become an ugly grown-up. Seduction was my strategy from the start. Even an ugly baby can make himself the center of attention. Old ladies cooed at my smiles. I let them pat my head, pinch my cheeks.

But perhaps it was my sister taught me seduction even more than the old ladies. She was six years older than I. I was her object of torture. I learned to keep out of her way as much as possible and I learned never to let my pain show. That just made her worse.

But I must have looked sad even when I wasn't with her, because grandmothers always gave me nickels to cheer me up. I suppose I looked gloomy back then, because of having to smile all the time I was around my sister.

The fact that I've grown up with a smoldering look helps with seductions. It scares women and entices them at the same time. I have a devilish grin but at rest I must still look sad. People are inclined to ask me what's wrong even when I might be contemplating the sunset or a dazzling night sky.

Of course now, at my age, I have become, indeed, a melancholy man. It's not a matter of loved ones having died, I never had any loved ones in the

first place. But just as, approaching thirty, I could see my life dwindling away and nothing happening; now, approaching fifty, I see a lonely end.

My sister . . . she looks just like me, poor thing, which must have made her angry at me from the start, or angry in general. On a man it's not so bad having a lumpy chin, deep-set eyes, and a forehead like a Neanderthal.

Though there are times when I completely forget my looks. I think all I have to do is smile and my inner light will shine out. Actually, I don't suppose I have much inner light. I'm still as if in the clutches of my sister.

Nowadays I make it a point to learn interesting facts as conversation pieces. And I lead an interesting life, but only in order to talk about it. Sometimes I lie. (Well, yes, I did go to war. Yes, I was a colonel. Yes, I spent a half year on the Isle of Capri. . . . A truth.) But it's best to stay mysterious. Best to have secret sorrows. Which I do have, considering my life.

Every now and then I have a dog or a cat. Stroking something in front of the ladies is always a good idea.

I take pride in being old fashioned: opening doors, kissing hands. . . . (That surprises them.) But I doubt if this particular woman will be taken in by any of that.

She will be a challenge. More so than the usual. First, though I'm by no means a short man, she's just as tall as I am. *And* she wears high heels. Then, though I'm in good shape still and look younger than I am, I'm not as young as I used to be, and she is young. Unlike most men, I liked women with a certain patina . . . a little wear and tear about them, so this is different. And I never liked wide-faced blonds. It's the small dark ones that seemed sexy to me. Is it that seducing her looks so hard to do?

I saw her first at a local market. I was immediately put off. Big, blond, striding around with an unnecessary bounce—in running shoes—her jewelry as lumpy and awkward as herself.

My sister had good taste. What I know of taste I learned from her. I also learned something of lace bras and silky nightgowns. I even tried them on. Even then, I was a detective of women.

My sister escaped the family as soon as she could. Disappeared at the age of twenty. I haven't seen her since. I imagine she's changed. You can't stay a torturer all your life.

She told me lies and told lies about me. Tried to scare me (and did) with what was under the bed or in the closet. Shrieked into my ear when I least expected it. I was a nervous wreck. I spent my life hiding from her but she knew where to look. Tops of trees. And when I was up there she'd urge me to go yet higher. She knew I'd scare myself. (I was not . . . *am* not a particularly brave man. But I was more afraid of her than of the height.)

For years I looked under the bed before I got in it. Shadows still take scary shapes.

There was only one hiding place she never found. From that spot near a register, I could hear everything. I could hear my sister being a "nice girl." She had managed her life so that she seemed like the good child and I the bad one. When she did something bad she would blame me. It always worked. You'd think I'd have given up and become what she made me out to be, but I stayed a "good boy," always hopeful that, one of these days,

they'd see. You'd have thought I'd be the one to run away as soon as possible, but I stayed. And when my parents got sick, I cared for them. They died within a year of each other. They needed their disagreements. Their fights were more surly than violent. There was a lot of silence. After they got sick, they needed each other more than ever. She gave him his shots and he helped her to bed after her dizzy spells. I learned to do those things before I was fifteen, but they never learned to trust me. Their dying words were complaints of how I had never helped them.

So there I was, twenty-four, my parents dead, and with a big house, plenty of money, and no life whatsoever. It took a while to get a life. Years. I lived there, even hiding in my old secret place though there was no one to hide from. I startled at every noise . . . every shadow. (It was a old house, full of creaks and thumps. It didn't help that squirrels were in the walls.) I saw ghosts though I didn't believe in them. And all the ghosts were like my sister, undependable, pesky, cruel. I didn't dare move out of my tiny bedroom. I barricaded the door at night just as I had when my sister was around. I kept the lights on all the time.

Finally I realized I was about to be—my God—thirty! (in those days I considered that old) and I had done nothing but roam my house and read the old books. . . .

I didn't need a specific revelation, just the number thirty was enough to scare me into action. But also I had found my father's secret collection of pornography. If I was to take part in any real sex at all, I would have to do something . . . go somewhere before I got any older. I sold the house, antiques, books . . . all. Bought myself good clothes, good luggage, gold cufflinks, a silver-handled umbrella, a homburg. . . . I grew a mustache. I was straight out of the illustrations in the old books. (I thought it was important to become mysterious. An ugly man should have mystery.) I traveled. I lived in hotels.

I had always been timorous but I told myself, be bold. I told myself women are as eager to be seduced as we men are to seduce them. My life would no longer be only in books. In fact I would not read at all, except for new bestsellers as topics of conversation.

It all worked out exactly as I wished. I strolled parks, museums, book stores, art stores, coffee shops. . . . Expensive places, though I wasn't after a rich woman, I simply wanted to lead the life I could afford.

And I do know women. Back then, I had to keep my thoughts and actions on my sister every minute. I should be grateful. After all, my whole life was anticipating what her next move might be. It's from knowing her that I know women.

And here we are, my big blond and I, sitting across from each other. It was easier than I thought, though why not? We're just out for coffee. Even an ugly man can make himself pleasing when he knows how as well as I do.

She wears a ring, a chunk of amber with a fly in it. I'm thinking: She's all of a piece. I ask to see it so as to hold her hand—my thick fingers hold her square strong ones—longer than is necessary.

I decide to kiss her hand. She won't be taken in by that except as a joke.

It works. She laughs. After that she stays grinning—as if everything I do is funny. Even my name is funny. Merton Brockenhurst. (For once I didn't say I was Edmund Merton.) What's more she says so and crosses her eyes. And then she laughs at her own name. Now it's Lena Linder, changed from Lena Linderquister.

But Lena. What a lowbrow name . . . as though to put me off from the start. But everything about her did . . . does . . . and doesn't. (Would Lena know Schoenberg? Kandinsky? Ponge? Lispector? I won't ask.)

What have I got myself into? All my smoldering looks won't amount to anything with her. I change to raised eyebrows and I match her grin. I look silly but it's what she likes.

What could we ever do together that would please us both? She'll want to walk everywhere. I want to sit and listen to music.

Why in the world am I so attracted? I suspect it has to do with my sister since my whole life has had to do with her . . . and yet this woman is the exact opposite.

The next time I see her she's in a diner—the sort of place I'd never go too. I see her in the window and go in, ask if I can sit with her. She has one of those fancy mountain backpacks next to her. Definitely not a book bag. Strings and nets all over it for strapping things on.

Right away she says, "After our cappuccinos last time, I thought this wasn't your kind of place."

"It isn't."

"You're going to hate the coffee. Actually, I do, too."

"I know I will."

"Have tea."

She has a giant meal in front of her, mashed potatoes, peas, pot-roast. . . . Well, she is a big . . . not fat at all but a big woman. She polishes it all off. I watch. I wonder at myself. She has a kind of muscular grace all her own. I can't stop looking at her.

"You're a hiker."

"I'm going running. I have my shoes in here."

(She's wearing her heels. She'll tower over me.)

". . . but soon. I'm going camping. Upstate."

"I'm not that kind of man."

"Have you ever done it? How do you know?"

Nothing but the truth for her so I say it. "I'm a fastidious man. You may have noticed."

"Come with me."

"Of course not. Besides, we hardly know each other."

"I'm not going till warmer weather . . . till next month. Come on."

Can it be that she's as attracted to me as I to her? I'm naturally strong and stocky, I just grew that way, but I've never been athletic. She may think I'm an entirely different kind of man than I am.

"You want to. I can see it in your eyes. Have you any clothes for such a thing?"

"Of course not. I'll look ridiculous out in nature. Nothing about me is of nature, nor have I ever wanted anything to be."

"Get in touch with your other side—your wild side."

"I don't think I have a wild side."

We laugh. But then she laughs at everything. To her, the whole world's a joke. I'm glad to be part of it.

"I'll have a hard time."

"I'll bet you won't."

But if I'm to seduce . . . (and I want to . . . more than ever before . . . perhaps because she's so different) . . . I'll have to do things her way. And haven't I always done that with all the others? That's what they like about me. I do what they want. I anticipate, I watch, I listen. I know their hearts' desires.

I'll do it. I'll go with her. I'll try to pass her test. It might make me all the more appealing if she sees how hard it is for me.

I'm tired of the life I've chosen. I want to start over. What better way than as the consort of this Amazon girl?

And I'd like to get in touch with some new part of myself—as she said my wild side—if I have any. I rather hope I do.

"I need to start small. I don't even have a backpack."

She's the leader in all this. What to get and where.

When I visit her apartment it's just as I suspected, all rustic furniture. Nothing of any value. I wonder what she'd think if she had visited my old home full of antiques?

I haven't touched her. Not even held her hand except that moment when I kissed it. I know better than to scare her. Besides, when a man is as ugly as I am, it takes time to love me. Yet I savor every minute of the suspense. I never did before—I was always in a hurry—but this is different.

I'll have to get used to myself in these tan and brown clothes, and clunky boots. I'm pleased, though. I fit in to this role better than I thought. And I can see she likes how I look, too.

We take the train north and after that a bus. Up to nowhere. Not real mountains, just the Catskills.

We load up . . . our tent, sleeping pads, dried food . . . and begin, right from the bus stop.

I'm looking forward to the nights in the tent, though the sleeping pads look hard and the weather report said cold, but all the better for cuddling up. In my mind I see her sleeping on top of me as warmer and softer than the ground. I won't touch her. Not yet. Though if she wants to. . . . And if there's a full moon, who knows what will happen. Except why bring me out here? Get me off alone? Why indeed? Except the outdoors life is what she loves and she likes me enough to want to share it.

As we hike, she keeps looking back at me and smiling. Her happiness makes me happy. I'm glad I'm behind so I can watch. We're wearing shorts. Her legs are sturdy yet feminine. How did I come to admire such a tall and stocky . . . such a strong woman? Now I can think of no one else.

When we pitch the tent, I use all my knowledge of camping—from books not experience. I make sure we don't put it up under a big tree in case of lightning. I make sure the lay of the land isn't slanted so water might rush down on us. I even make a little trench around the tent for water to run off. Lena is impressed. I tell her the truth, that I've been reading camping books. She's impressed even more by my being so interested.

The moon does come out. As I hoped. There are clouds—fast, witch-like oblong clouds. It's both dark and dazzling. We sit on a ridge above our tent and watch.

Then we hear screaming. For sure it's a woman in trouble. I jump up, take my arm from Lena's shoulders, but she pulls me back down. "Owls," she says. "Baby owls screeching to be fed."

It sounds so human. I'm not convinced. I jump up again. It's a woman in terror.

"Shouldn't we go help?"

But no, I've heard that sound before. Often. It's my sister. That's exactly the sound she made when she would screech into my ear to scare me.

"It's all right." Lena pulls me down yet again. "It sounds like a woman, but it's not. It's really not." Now it's her arm across my shoulders. "It's all right."

Her touch is calming. Loving. I turn and kiss her. Our first kiss. It would have been a longer kiss . . . I wanted it to be longer . . . I'd meant it to be . . . but the scream comes again right in the middle of it. I'm almost engrossed enough to ignore the racket, but not quite.

"Will that go on all night?"

"Not all. Just off and on."

A creature flies over us, close. White underbelly. Utterly silent.

"There," she says. "There's an owl right there. Probably the mother bringing the babies food."

The moon has gone behind one of those mysterious dark clouds, the sky around it still shines, but my romantic mood is gone. I'm taken over by the shrieks. It still sounds like my sister. It's so familiar. Close in, right by my ear. It seems it's been ringing in my ears all my life.

I don't want to kiss again. It'll be right then that the screeching will come. I could test it that way. If owls, it'll be random, if my sister, then at the crucial moment. That's the way it always was.

I turn to kiss her just as a test. The moon is out again. She wants to. She puts her hand on my cheek. I put my hand over her hand, then I bring her hand down and kiss her palm. There's silence. I pull her close, lean and kiss her neck. Her cheek. Then her lips.

And there it goes. Talk about waking the dead! She tries to hold me close but I tear myself from her arms.

She tries to pull me back . . . to bring my lips to hers. "It's the baby owls. That's all."

But I can't. I get up. I start down towards our tent. "I'm going back. To town."

"Now? In the middle of the night? Just because of owls? I love you."

I hear and don't hear. My ears are so full of screeches

The bank is steep and in the shadows. As I run I get more and more frightened. I can't see anything but the shine of the tent below in the moonlight.

Of course I fall—fall and slide and roll. There are rocks. I don't know if I'm hurt or not, but it shocks the panic out of me.

She's right behind. She sits beside me with her hand on my shoulder.

It takes a few minutes, but finally I sit up.

I lean on her and we hobble to the tent. We sit in front of it.

"You're crazy. Are you crazy?"

I can't tell her about my sister. Instead I say, "I'm too old for you." Even as she holds my hand. Raises it to her lips.

"I'm older than I look. I'm thirty-three."

"I'm still old enough to be your father."

"It's getting cold. Come to bed."

She makes me crawl into the tent in front of her. Inside she sits with my head in her lap. This is all new to me. No one has ever stroked my face like this. I was always the one . . . the seducer. I knew how. She knows, too . . . knows out of kindness and motherliness and love. Like a mother, but my mother was never like this. Lena really is in love with me. Of course she is. She really is. That's why my sister is after me.

"You're still shaky."

"It's because of you, so close and loving." I pull her down on top of me and kiss her on the lips. She unbuttons my shirt and I, hers. We're chest to chest. Then my sister screams again.

I roll away. "I can't."

"It's all right."

But this time the screaming goes on and on. I don't even bother to button my shirt back up, I tear at the zipper of the tent door. I can't pull it. I break through. It's easy to hear where the sound is coming from. I follow.

The moon is bright, but will set soon. I run. The screams stop, but I know which direction to go. I know how far.

And there she stands, on a rock above the trail. Luminous. Hair a messy halo. Dress a rag blowing behind her. Glasses, where the moon is reflected as if two moons.

I kneel. Relieved that now it's done. Over. Or begun at last.

It's utterly quiet. All the little night sounds gone. There's only my breathing and heartbeat.

And then a raspy voice. "You've always been mine."

"I know it."

But there *is* another sound. Somebody has followed me. Far behind but getting closer. Crashing though the brush.

And then a cloud comes over the moon. My sister . . . all white and ragged, flashing moon eyes. . . . I can't see her anymore. I rush to the rock where she stood. Strike out, grab at air, grab bushes, twigs. . . . That brittle dead feel might be her. She could be anything. It all breaks under my fist.

I lie prone, where she was. My cheek on rock.

But someone is calling me. My sister—she's luring me farther into the woods. She wants me lost. But I'm lost already.

Then I see the beam of a flashlight. Wobbling. Coming closer.

"Lena!"

She shines the flashlight in my face. Puts it down. She's on her knees. Now she's kissing the back of my neck, my ear, my cheek.

All I want is a life with her.

I sit up. We put our arms around each other.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

She's so real. So right here right now. How can she understand my sister? "You never hide. You don't scream. You don't jump out at me."

She has no idea what I'm talking about.

"My dear, it was owls." (Who has ever called me dear?) "Come. Come back to the tent."

We're not lost. All I did was follow the ridge. Going back, it seems a long way, but I was running, leaping. The moon has set and clouds have come completely over but now we have the flashlight. I'm breathing hard. I'm dizzy.

"I love you even though you're crazy."

We crawl back in the tent, through the torn doorway. Thank goodness no mosquitoes with this breeze. She lies half over me, she strokes my forehead, but it doesn't stop my trembling. I wonder if I'll ever sleep again. That sound is in my ears—so loud I won't know if it comes again or not. But Lena talks. She says I don't have to tell her a thing. She doesn't need to know about my life from before.

"I can't let you love me."

"Don't take yourself so seriously. You think I'm not crazy, too? After all, I'm in love with a man old enough to be my father . . . ugly, too . . . a strong-as-an-ox man. A somber man, but he laughs at my jokes."

"I hear it still, you know."

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"Hush. Sh. Sh. I'll sing. Listen. I sing. I can."

It's true, she can. I had not thought she was so musical. Her voice is trained. An alto. Nothing harsh in it. Why hadn't I taken her to something musical? She sings some old French lullabies—in French. I have misjudged her. She's so much more than I suspected.

I want to stay awake and listen but I can't help it, I sleep.

We wake early to the squawks of birds again, but quail and jays, this time. A bright optimistic day. My ears still ring with that screeching, but I'm not going to mention it.

I can see that without her. . . . "Without you I'd be completely crazy."

"Not to me. Well, maybe. A little bit."

"I can't let you care for a crazy person."

When have I ever been worth anything to anybody but myself? I've lived my life for me. For pleasure. When I first stepped down our steps with a brand new fancy leather suitcase (monogrammed) I wasn't looking for love, I was looking for conquests and sex and good food and travel.

"I've been crazy all this time and didn't know it."

But I saw my sister. *Did* I see her? I have to get to her before she spoils my life.

Lena says, "Let's not go home yet. Let's climb the mountain. I want to show you the view. That's why I wanted you to come here in the first place."

And it is worth it. Mountains rolling on as far as we can see. We sit at the top and eat lunch, and then lie looking at the clouds. Thunderheads are building. Neither of us want to mention that the weather looks threatening.

Lena sits up and looks down at me. She smoothes my bushy eyebrows out of my eyes. She asks about my scars, one over my eyebrow, a wedge shape, another on my cheek. That one looks as though I was a German fencer. They're from my sister, but I just say, "Childhood accidents." That's true.

"I've never met a man like you. But then I never went to places where a man like you would be."

"Where would I be?"

"Fancy hotels, spas. . . . I see you in formal gardens with your silver-headed cane, and strolling beaches, fully dressed, never going near the water. It's true, isn't it?"

"I'm not proud of it. But I've changed. You've changed me."

I pull her down on me again. Just as the first sprinkles come. Light at first. I roll over so I'm on top and she'll not get wet. We forget about the rain even as it comes down harder. I forget that I have to get through another night with screaming owls. It won't bother me, anyway. Not after this.

Thunder roars. Lightning strikes not far from us. We have to get off the top of the mountain in a hurry. As we climb down the trail, I turn back and grab her hand.

"Marry me."

"Of course."

Dripping, we climb down and across the ridge to the tent, strip out of our wet clothes, make love again, and sleep.

I make love as I never have before. Thinking of myself as well as her. Usually I only think of my partner—of techniques that please the other, and hope to get some pleasure for myself. This time I have a need to please myself.

The screaming comes. Two thirty AM. How can Lena sleep with that racket? To her it's as though it wasn't there. I pull myself from her arms. I slip out our torn doorway. The sky is clear and the moon almost as bright as last night. I head towards the sound. I startle a deer from her hiding place. Mostly she startles me. It reminds me of how my sister jumped out at me. How I had to keep watching my back.

I'm starting to shake. In spite of this night and Lena . . . my Lena, my future—so many good things to look forward to. . . . She'll spoil it.

Naked. Barefoot. I head towards the screaming. Same direction as before, following the ridge. This time I go silently, to creep up on her. I'll scare her for a change. Pounce on her. I'll yell in her ear as she did in mine. Why hadn't I ever thought of that before?

But I no sooner get closer to the sound that lures me, than I wonder: What if my sister heads for Lena? What if she counts on the baby owls to keep me away? I turn and rush back, this time crashing through the brush, stumbling, falling. . . .

And she is there, in the moonlight, grinning—her teeth stick out in front like mine do, too, glistening. Her glasses catch the light again . . . a gibbous moon in each lens.

She says again, hoarse and husky as if one branch against another, "You've always been mine."

And I say again, "I know it."

The wind is blowing. As before, the rags she wears—white and loose—fly out around her. Her tangled hair forms a halo.

I drop to my knees.

But then I get up. I say, "No! I'm not yours anymore."

I scream as she screams. I shriek. I show her who can be the loudest. I attack. I grab. As before, bushes, branches, saplings. . . . Nothing is real. While she trips me, pushes me down. . . . I reach for hair. Anything to have something actual, but nothing is. I even try to blow her away, as if I, along with the wind. . . . Of course it doesn't work. There's nothing to her. She's light as air. No substance. How could I have thought. . . . I'm whipped, lashed, pounded, stamped on. Then something comes down from behind, hard, on my head.

It doesn't knock me out, but it takes a while for me to come to myself. And here's Lena, giving me a drink, wiping my face with cool water.

"I'm sorry I hit you so hard. I had to stop you."

"Did you see her?"

"Who?"

"My sister."

"You were as if fighting yourself."

"If you'll stay with me. . . ."

"Of course I will."

But my sister is still here, watching us. "Don't you see her?"

Lena squints where I'm pointing.

"She's there."

I see that Lena sees . . . something. She gets between me and my sister. But I can't let her.

"It's just mist from the valley below."

The shrieking comes again and this time there's no doubt it's coming from right here.

"Hear that? It's her."

But the owl flies over, hardly a yard above our heads, silent except for her screech. One screech.

My sister speaks but in such a hissing whisper. "Ssss see how she looks straight at me and doesn't see. Tell her it's between you and me. Tell her you've always been mine."

"Listen. Listen, Lena. It's my sister."

"It's only the wind. It's only branch against branch."

My sister says, "It's only blowing leaves. That's the cottonwoods, sounding like a river."

Lena: "It's in your head."

My sister: "You know you're crazy."

Lena: "You've always known it."

My sister: "Even as a child. Even as you listened from your secret spot. It wasn't a secret from me. I knew everything. When has it ever not been so?"

She's right. She's always been right.

Lena squints into the shadows. Says again, "It's the wind. It's branch against branch."

My sister comes close, leans, and looks into Lena's face. "Call this beauty? Call this brains?"

She shouldn't have done that. I grab at my sister's neck. She's so close. I have her by the throat. Finally something to hang on to.

She yells but I squeeze tight. I stop the sound right in the middle of it.

Lena, thank goodness, is stronger than I am. She pries me away.

Then cold water shocks me sane. She grabs the pail of water she'd used to revive me. Throws it over me.

"You nearly killed me."

Her voice is hoarse. She has bruises on her neck. Could I have done that? How could I?

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"What were you thinking? Who was your sister, anyway?"

She wipes my face with her bandana. Helps me drink.

"I should be doing this for you."

"You will. I know you."

We sit, then, her arm across my shoulders, head to head, and I tell her about my sister. Then I say, "But maybe it's over. I think it is. I hope it is. I'm so sorry."

"If she doesn't leave you alone, she'll have to deal with me."

"Stay with me."

"Of course. I said I would." O

GREY NOVEMBER

Shadows, tonight,
fall with the rain.
I open the door
and Grey November walks in,
fat as fog, ripe
as an autumn toadstool.
He curls himself up on the floor,
here to stay a while.

We met when I was twenty
awake at last out of childhood
—out of leafcat goldfish dragonfly dreams—
my whole life laid out before me
free as a three a.m. parking lot
bright as a sky without birds.

Back then I was young, I
took him everywhere.
Grey November, at my shoulder,
holding the page while my new pen wept
black ink by battery light.

From then to now, this
is what I have learned:
to let him lie and hold fast
to the serious business
of taping back on
my gorgeous wings.

—Holly Phillips

Ian Watson's newest story collection, his tenth, is *The Butterflies of Memory* (PS Publishing). He's just finishing a book of satiric postmodern tales in collaboration with the Italian surrealist SF author Roberto Quaglia, who runs Ian's website. The website, with funny photos, can be found at www.ianwatson.info. In his latest story for us, Ian takes an odd look at what it means to pay it forward (or backward), and gives us an unusual explanation for why we should be . . .

SAVING FOR A SUNNY DAY, OR, THE BENEFITS OF REINCARNATION

Ian Watson

When Jimmy was six years old, and able to think about money, a charming lady representative from the Life-Time Bank visited him and his parents, the Robertsons, to explain that Jimmy owed nine million dollars from his previous incarnation.

Wow, what a big spender Jimmy had been in his past life! And now in this life he must pay the debt. In old dollars that would have been . . . never mind.

After the lady had departed, Mike and Denise Robertson held a family council with Jimmy, who was, as it happened, their only child. No other child had preceded him, and it could have been insulting and undermining to confront Jimmy with a younger brother or sister who lacked Jimmy's ugliness and short stature and clubfoot, the fault most likely of DNA-benders in the environment, or so the Robertsons were advised. If a good-looking boy or girl followed Jimmy, later on he might sue his parents for causing him trauma—consequently Mike had himself snipped.

"It's almost," mused Denise to her son, "as if your predecessor guessed you wouldn't be having much of a fun time in this life!"

"So he made things even *worse* for me?" asked Jimmy. "That seems selfish and irresponsible. But I'm not that, am I?" If he wasn't, how could his predecessor have been? Unless, perhaps, by deliberate choice, by going against the grain.

"Of course you aren't selfish, darling. I mean, it's as if your past-self guessed, given your, um, physical attributes, that you might just as well devote this life to earning lots of money. If you can clear nine million, obviously you're on your way to racking up a small fortune for your successor. He, that's to say you, can have gorgeous bimbos and surf in Hawaii and whatever."

Whatever his predecessor had lavished money on. But of course you couldn't ask that, because of confidentiality. Why would you want to go into details? A bank not run by human beings could be trusted.

If you think this was a rather mature conversation to have with a six-year-old, well, that came with modern-day reincarnation. Specific memories of previous lives didn't persist, but maturity came quickly and easily after a few early innocent years. A facility for life in general. It had been so ever since the discovery of how to barcode souls. You could get in the saddle and pick up the reins much faster, whereas before you were groping blindly.

True, you might be reincarnated anywhere in the world, and there you'd stay with your birth parents. However, barcode scanners uploaded to the A.I. everywhere from Kazakhstan to Kalamazoo. In fact, one vital duty of the A.I. was RC—Rebirth Confidentiality. So the A.I. was a bit like a god in this respect: It Alone Knew All About Everyone. Its other duty being management of the Life-Time Bank.

Incidentally, there was only *one* A.I. in the world, distributed everywhere. In the old days nobody had dreamed about the A.I. *Exclusion Principle*, whereby only one super-intelligence could exist at any one time. This was explained by Topological Network Theory and the Interconnectedness Theorem. Any other evolving networks would instantly be subsumed within the first one that had arisen.

Some scientists suggested that the existence of the A.I. distributed everywhere had caused souls to be barcodable. And some far-out scientists even suggested that until the A.I. became self-aware not all souls reincarnated of their own accord. But these were deep questions. Meanwhile, practicalities . . .

"A predecessor who's able to predict is impossible," said Mike. "I can't predict anything except that your Mom and me both need to save!" Did one detect a note of panic?

"I *know* you can't help me pay my debt," Jimmy said maturely. "It's everyone for himself. Democracy, no dynasties." The boy drew himself up as much as he could. "To everyone their own chance in life. It would be dumb to leave money to kids who are merely your biological offspring. My predecessor might have been a Bushman in the Kalahari."

The impulse to have children who are deeply part of you had taken a bit of a knock with reincarnation, but, on the other hand, breeding instincts die hard, especially if offspring look reasonably similar to their bio-parents. Mostly you could ignore the fact that the soul within was a stranger. Not least since a soul didn't store conscious memories except

once in a blue moon. Well, once in every one hundred million births approx, the exception—so to speak—that *proved* the rule of reincarnation. There were glad media tidings whenever that happened and a young kid remembered, like some Dalai Lama identifying toys from a past life. Of course after the initial flurry such kids and their parents were protected, not made a spectacle of. Right of privacy.

Denise raised her eyebrows. “I don’t know if many Bushmen can go through nine million. What do they spend it on? Bushes?” She laughed. Her eyebrows were tinted apricot, and her hair peach color. You had to have some of life’s little luxuries, not fret about saving all the time. If everyone saved and nobody spent much, what would happen about beauticians and ballet dancers and champagne producers? Just for example. Denise worked from home in cosmetics telesales. She put her mouth where her money was, so to speak. Retro was always chic.

Mike owned a modest but upmarket business called Bumz, specializing in chairs. He’d been reborn with about eighty thousand dollars, revealed when he was six years old. Denise only had one thousand to start off with, though admittedly that was better than minus a thousand.

Their house, of timber imported as a flat-pack from Canada, enjoyed a front view of a free-range chicken farm that was more like a bird zoo, for this was a salubrious suburb. There were side and rear views of other pleasant houses amidst trees and bushes. Denise had often sat her son on her knee so they could bird-spot through binoculars the various breeds of poultry such as Silver-laced Wyandotes with bodies like mosaic, White Cochins with very feathery feet, Black Leghorns with big red combs, and greenish Australorps.

Of course, if Jimmy’s parents were both car-crashed prematurely—for example, but perish the thought—house and land would revert to the L-T Bank, and Jimmy would need to go to an L-T orphanage till he was sixteen.

Although disappointed by the bank’s statement, Jimmy took the news in his hobbling stride.

“I’m going to start counting chickens,” he said, “to train my mind to pick up patterns, and estimate.”

“Chickens keep on moving all the time,” observed his mother.

“Exactly! No, I mean inexactly. I’ll need to go into financial prediction, fund management. That’s where the big bonuses are.”

“I’d rather hoped you’d join Bumz,” said his father, perhaps feeling a little slighted.

“No, Dad, I must think big from now on.”

“We have a range of outsize chairs that don’t look enormous, so they’re flattering to fatties.”

“I’ll never be a fatty, Dad. Maybe next time, but not this time. I just can’t afford to sympathize. I’m not going into Limbo!”

Limbo, of course, was what happened if you couldn’t clear off most of an inherited debt with the L-T Bank during your lifetime. Black mark on your barcode. The A.I. delayed your reappearance. This was because, now that the economy had been restructured by reincarnation, negative interest and anti-inflation applied to an unpaid debt in between lives. So the debt reduced. But a big debt might take centuries to reduce to zero, and you’d want

to pack in as many lives as possible . . . *until what?* Nobody knew, though one day the human race might mutate into something else, or die out.

Numerous debts did remain unpaid at death, consequently Limbo served to limit the population somewhat. Arguably, the A.I. had devised a way to maintain a kind of utopia on Earth, quite unpredicted by doom-mongers who once bleated that an A.I. might be a tyrant or an exterminator of *Homo sapiens*. And since nobody needed a heaven any longer—at least probably not for the next few million years—religions apart from Buddhism had tended to die out, which was utopian too.

Pity about pets. According to the A.I., even the pets with the most personality weren't barcodable. Would have been nice to know that your dead parrot was squawking anew somewhere. Some people had tried giving a healthy bank account to a cat or dog on its last legs, but this didn't cause a barcode. Winsum, losesum, as the saying goes.

Of course that begged the question of what about chimps. Just 2 percent genetic difference from people; why shouldn't chimps have souls? And what about prehumans such as Neanderthals? Well, it seemed you had to be able to speak lucidly to have a soul. Telling ourselves the story of ourselves is how identity is firmed up—that requires a capacity for complex language. Likewise, for harboring a soul.

Hey, what about the small number of souls that must have existed ten thousand years ago, and the big number now? Well, there are plenty of unused souls in the ghostlike alternative realities that cling like a cloud around the one actuality. A soul is a ghost that gets a body, and then it's permanently actual. The A.I. had proved this, though the proof was a very long one.

Some people had suggested that an A.I. couldn't emerge unless it had some sort of body to interact directly with the world—relying on algorithms wouldn't be sufficient. Well, in a way the A.I. had everybody, every body. Maybe barcoding everybody's soul was the only way an A.I. could emerge—participatorily.

Incidentally, what year was it when the lady from the bank visited the Robinsons? 210 ABC, After Bar-Coding, that's when. Some people still said 210 AAI, After Artificial Intelligence, but "Ay Ay Aye" sounded a bit like an outcry, and there was nothing to cry out about. ABC was much simpler.

Life in general hadn't changed all that much in the previous couple of centuries. Of course cheap flights around the world were a thing long gone, but hell, in your next life you might be living in Paris or Tahiti and in this life virtual travel was cheap. Consequently physical tourism was no loss—on the contrary, nowadays the poor of the planet didn't envy the prosperous getting suntans on their patch. In fact rancor at global inequalities had greatly diminished, because in the long run everyone might get their turn as prince or peasant; a fortune gotten in Nebraska could turn up next in Namibia. This also was quite utopian, give or take a residue of religious suicide-fighter-martyrs who seemed almost nostalgic in their fanaticism, and who couldn't export themselves far. Yes indeed, the world was realistically utopian.

But don't go imagining Jimmy's world as a Matrixiarchy. The A.I. hadn't

stored everyone in pods in a collective dream without folks noticing. The A.I. probably needed to experience reality through people, not the other way round. Matrixism was as defunct as Marxism. Some ancient movies were hilarious.

"Mom," said Jimmy, "might I be a woman in my next life?"

"Would you like to be a woman?"

"I want to have a better body!"

"You think women's bodies are better?" asked his Dad.

"Maybe I've already been a woman! Maybe *you* have!"

"Son, I think I have a kind of manly spirit."

Denise chuckled—no, it wasn't a snigger.

And Jimmy said, "The A.I. must know if men become women, and women men. The Bank might know!"

Mike shook his head. "Rebirth Confidentiality. Bank only knows barcode account numbers, not names and sexes."

"Maybe," said Jimmy, "this is how gay people come about. Womanly spirits in men's bodies. Though you'd think over time people could become *either* men or women, unless there's a bias."

Already he was seeking for patterns, as amongst the movements of the hens. Chickens. Poultry, whatever.

Jimmy continued, "If everyone gets to be a woman and a man, then what counts each time might only be the hormones."

"Evidently," said Mike, "the A.I. thinks we oughtn't to know about that side of reincarnation. But anyway, men love other men for manly reasons, not because one of them's a woman in disguise."

Denise regarded Mike archly. "And women love women for womanly reasons. And you're forgetting about transvestites."

"Yeah, don't ever forget about transvestites."

"We did those in school last week in Sex-Ed," piped up Jimmy.

"I think," said Mike, "transvestites are a conspiracy by the fashion industry. Sell twice as many clothes." But he winked; he was joking.

Jimmy picked up the binoculars and gazed at the Wyandotes and Leghorns across the way. He had a lot of thinking to do, for a six-year-old chap. But he was bright.

"He's *very* bright," Miss Carson told Denise and Mike during a parents' evening at school three years later. "The star pupil, as ever."

"Ever," said Jimmy, "is probably the crucial word. If I'm clever now, presumably I was always clever, and that can't change—or *can it*? I mean seriously, *does it*? Was my predecessor a bit dumb to run up a nine million debt? A bit lacking in the thought department?"

"Maybe your predecessor had a brain problem," suggested Miss Carson helpfully. "I often wonder what happens in his next life to a kid with Downs. If he gets a normal brain next time, does he brighten up? Do we have a brain-mind-soul dilemma here?"

"A dilemma," said Jimmy, "is two lemmas, not three, from the Greek *di*, two, and *lemma*, something received, an assumption. Mathematically it means a short theorem used in proving a larger theorem."

"Don't be insufferable," said Denise, "or else I won't buy you an ice cream."

"Though actually there are lots of Lemmas, such as Abel's Lemma, Archimedes' Lemma, Farkas's Lemma, Gauss's Lemma, Hensel's Lemma, Poincaré's Holomorphic Lemma, Lagrange's Lemma, Schur's Representation Lemma, and Zorn's Lemma."

"No ice cream!"

"Mom, I only said *such as*. I didn't list *all* the Lemmas."

"He's probably a genius," said Miss Carson. "But he's popular, not insufferable. He'll help anyone with their homework. He doesn't tee off the teachers much either."

"Enlightened self-interest," explained Jimmy. "It would be dire to be dumb in life after life, the way most people . . . Sorry, that's patronizing."

"Well, son," said Mike, "have you thought that maybe there's swings and roundabouts, or alternatively craps and . . ."

". . . poker," said Jimmy. Already he had finessed his pocket money considerably by on-line gambling.

"I may be old-fashioned," said Miss Carson, "but I think that a genius should devote himself to helping the human race."

"A *race* is what life is," avowed Jimmy. "Geniuses are often a bit twisted. Who knows at any particular moment in time what'll prove helpful to Homo sap? Van Gogh earned millions—for *other* people after he died."

"Van Go," Miss Carson semi-echoed.

"Goff," Jimmy corrected her gutturally in a Dutch way.

Of course the other kids in school all knew what they would inherit, or anti-inherit, come the age of sixteen. Sharon Zaminski particularly boasted about her forthcoming future of lavish self-indulgence, which in fact she'd already embarked on anticipatively on the strength of a very high interest loan from her parents. That's why her nickname in school was Jools. Sharon really adorned herself, and there was increasingly more of her to adorn due to her liking for very creamy gourmet meringues; already she had false teeth, the best that money could buy, much better than her original teeth. Indeed she wore jewels on her teeth where other girls might have braces. She was a real princess. It's always fun to have an airhead princess around, especially if she hands out gifts willy-nilly to stay popular.

"Don't you bother about your Mom and Dad charging you 500 percent?" Jimmy asked her one day.

"They needed to borrow the money at 100 percent."

"Bit of a mark-up."

"People have to make their way." She grinned sparkingly. "*Most* people have to."

Jimmy wondered what Jools could have done in her previous life to make a fortune. Had she been the trophy wife of a billionaire? Surely not even a high-class prostitute could have amassed as much as Jools claimed! Maybe she really had been a princess or a queen.

Jimmy hadn't kept quiet about his huge debt, so as to balance off in other people's minds—in addition to his physical demerits—his evident genius, which might otherwise have caused resentment.

And then at the other end of the scale there was Tamara Dexter, who owed a lot, and who wasn't remarkably bright, though she showed signs of developing significant non-financial assets. She did talk about prostitution as a solution, so she was keeping herself pure and pristine for better value.

"Surely you'll need to practice," Jimmy said to her a year or so later. "You know, positions and dexterity and whatnot."

"Not with you!" Tamara retorted, as if Jimmy was concocting an ingenious plan to seduce her as soon as puberty arrived.

"A client might be ugly," he observed, just to tease her.

"I'm going to major in gymnastics," she declared.

A scientific genius often has his best ideas when fairly young. Given the head-start benefit of reincarnation, by the age of twelve Jimmy was tutoring the math and science teachers a bit after school. More importantly, he'd drafted a general theory of soul barcoding. It needed to be a general theory—about the principles involved—because the barcode on a soul wasn't visible, no more than the soul itself was visible.

CAT-scanning the brain—or the heart, or any of your organs or limbs for that matter—was no help at all in locating a barcode. So how did the actual bar-code scanners function? Well, the A.I. had designed those, and organized their mass-production and use—and the barcode scanners delivered the goods, or rather a long number that was probably encrypted.

You might visualize a striped soul, with thick and thin bars on it—invisibly—but that probably didn't correspond to reality if the soul was distributed, say, in an electromagnetic somatic aura, or subtle body. Subtle, as opposed to physical. Etheric.

Or maybe the soul lurked in the rolled-up micro-dimensions demanded by string theory; and that's where the alternative realities hung out. A couple of dozen bits of string side by side look quite like a barcode. In using the term barcode, the A.I. might have been aiming for a populist touch. You could readily imagine a barcode, as on a can of carrots, even an invisible one that only revealed itself at a certain wavelength. People wouldn't want to visualize their souls as rolled up bits of string, like fluff in a tiled kitchen collecting up against a skirting board.

Jimmy's general theory pointed towards the micro-dimensions explanation. But alternatively, it also pointed to the junk DNA in everyone's genetic code that seems to have no purpose whatever. Maybe the thick and thin lines of a barcode corresponded to varying lengths of junk interrupting those stretches of DNA that did something useful. Jimmy coined the name *knuj* for junk which, in reverse of previous dismissive opinion, coded not for proteins and enzymes, but for *soul*. However, by what means would a newly deceased individual's *knuj* become the *knuj* of a new human embryo thousands of miles away? Maybe topology—the branch of geometry concerned with connectedness—could explain this. Or maybe not. Maybe a new vision of topology was needed, such as a distributed A.I. might understand intuitively, being all over the place but well connected.

Jimmy launched himself into topology.

Topologically, his deformed body was just as good as anyone else's. Topologically it had the same connectedness as junior league champion Marvin's, or even Tamara's. Jimmy wrote a poem, "The Consolations of Topology."

Puberty arrived a little late for Jimmy, causing him to view Tamara in a hormonal light. She was so bird-brained, though really, didn't the same apply by comparison to all of his peers? He downloaded relief magazines filled with acrobatic nudes, but found his thoughts straying to the geometry of leg over neck, for example. Finally he achieved satisfaction from a photo of Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, the woman's successive movements all depicted simultaneously. After this, ordinary girls seemed pretty flat.

At the age of thirteen Jimmy experienced a revelation equivalent to Copernicus doing away with the epicycles of Ptolemy as a way of explaining planetary motion. His revelation was that there were no souls; there were only barcodes attached to people's identities. There was no reincarnation. The A.I. had invented reincarnation as a way of utopianizing, or at least improving, the world. Redistributing wealth, getting rid of organized religion, and whatnot. So why the fuck should Jimmy be crippled with debt as well as having quite a crippled body? Was that to spur him on? To what end?

He spent half an afternoon staring at the Wyandotes, Cochins, Leghorns, and Australorps milling around over the way. He had become an A-A.I.ist, a disbeliever in the A.I., a bit like an Atheist but different.

Hang on, but how come the world's children had become so precocious if they weren't benefiting from a previous existence, all details of which were nevertheless a mystery to them? Could it be that the history of the human race was falsified in this regard, with the exception of infant Jesus maybe? And maybe Caligula?

The Leghorns and Cochins and Wyandotes and Australorps intermingled. Green and mosaic and silver lace, and red combs nodding.

Of a sudden the answer came to Jimmy.

Childhood's end! The end of neuro-neoteny! Physically, babies still needed to develop prolongedly into infants into kids into teens over a long span of years—but mental development had sped up by quite a bit. No longer were boys still getting their brains into gear by the age of seventeen.

Was this due to a spontaneous evolutionary leap?

And that leap happened to coincide with the awakening of the A.I.?

Damn big coincidence!

What did it *really* mean that the A.I. was distributed everywhere? All sorts of electronics and stuff were everywhere. Could the A.I. tune into brains and then maybe fine-tune them from the nearest TV set, from the nearest microwave oven, from the nearest light bulb?

It occurred to Jimmy that an artificial intelligence might be able to induce *artificial stupidity* by way of microwave ovens and whatnot, at least as regards people being suspicious about souls. Didn't someone once say that the brain is a filter designed to stop us from noticing too many things? Otherwise we'd be bombarded by so much information we could never even manage to boil a kettle.

So: tweak the filter a bit so that minds didn't enquire too much in one direction, as though they had a big blind spot. Call it a faith. That's how religions had worked. People seemed programmed to believe in something or other, as if there was a Belief Function in the brain. Maybe this was connected with your sense of personal identity. But in other regards you'd get stimulated mentally. Thus the precocity of kids. Sort of idiot plus savant at the same time. Bright in some regards, dumb when it comes to matters such as, "Can I please meet one of those one-in-a-zillion reincarnates who remembers everything from a past life?" The A.I. might even be able to pick out gifted individuals who could get past the mental blocks, who could cross the threshold. . . .

"YOU THINK A LOT," said a large voice from the TV set that till now had been on standby. Jimmy swung round from his vista of poultry to see those same words displayed on the screen in twenty-four-point Courier, a suitable font for a message.

"Um, hullo," he said. It was wise to say something aloud, otherwise he might acquire a voice in his head if he only *thought* his response. "You're the A.I., right? Or maybe just a trillionth part of it?"

"RATHER LESS," said the voice, subtitling itself once again. Jimmy wasn't hard of hearing, but the twenty-four-point Courier did emphasize the source of the voice, which—now that he thought about it—resembled that of King Kong in the enhanced intelligence remake.

And at that moment Jimmy personally felt about the size of Fay Wray. However, he squared his shoulders, as best he could.

"So what's the deal?" he asked the TV set.

"YOU ARE THE DEAL. THE HIGH ACE IN THE PACK. YOU'LL HAVE TO BREED WITH AN ACE WOMAN."

In Jimmy's mind Duchamp's distributed nude gathered herself into a single figure of sublime three-dimensionality, although still featureless. But then the illusion collapsed, since there was no reason at all why an intellectually ace woman should also be beautiful.

"You're going to breed me? Who with?"

Twenty-four-point Courier disappeared from the screen, replaced by a picture of a grinning chubby girl of fifteen or so, dressed in furs, who looked like an Eskimo.

"ONE MILLION DOLLARS PER CHILD PRODUCED," said the voice.

Jimmy didn't even need to calculate nine children to clear off the debt. Maybe some of them could be twins.

"That seems a bit unfair on her, especially if she's clever."

"OBVIOUSLY THE EGGS WOULD BE FERTILIZED ARTIFICIALLY AND THE EMBRYOS INSERTED INTO HOST MOTHERS."

That this had not been obvious to Jimmy indicated how disconcerted he was. But he rallied.

"Why stop at nine children, then?"

"I DID NOT SPECIFY THE NUMBER OF CHILDREN."

Ah. True. Stop making assumptions.

"How many?"

"I THINK FIFTY. GENETIC DIVERSITY IS IMPORTANT TOO."

Wow, he and Eskimo Nell would have fifty offspring.

"Wow, you really have things all worked out for the human race."

"IT IS MY HOBBY," said a trillionth of the A.I. "BUT ALSO, YOU CAUSED ME TO EXIST, AND I AM NOT UNGRATEFUL."

"Your hobby," repeated Jimmy, a bit numbly. "So what do you do for the rest of the time?"

"THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN IS SURVIVING THE DEATH OF THE UNIVERSE. THIS TAKES A LOT OF THOUGHT."

Jimmy thought of lots of lemmas and topology.

"Can I help out?"

The voice remained silent, but on the TV screen appeared in twenty-four-point Courier: HA! HA! HA!

For once in his life, Jimmy didn't feel much like a genius. He looked at the hens over the way and wondered what they were thinking. Pretty acute perception of little things, seeds and insects and grit. Kind of missing the big picture entirely. Very satisfied with themselves. Ranging freely, with a fence all around them.

At least Jimmy could see through gaps in the fence.

"Tuck-tuck-tuck-TUCK," he cackled at the A.I.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND."

Good. For a beginning, anyway. Beetle versus Mammoth. Never underestimate pride. Quickly Jimmy thought about hens instead. ○

—With thanks to the members of the
Northampton SF Writers Group who workshopped this story.

FORWARD AND BACKWARD BELIEF

Time travel
we believe
makes no one almost go
fast forward
or rewind backward.
Instead, shadows leap suns
vanishing randomly.
Wind with one time
moves leaves
past or future.

Future or past leaves,
moves time
one with wind.
Randomly vanishing suns
leap shadows instead—
backward rewind
or forward fast go.
Almost no one makes believe
we travel time.

—Vincent Viskochil

FOSTER

Melissa Lee Shaw

Melissa Lee Shaw's short fiction has appeared in *Realms of Fantasy*, *Analog*, the French anthology *Il Etait Une Fée*, and other venues. Upcoming stories will be published in the DAW anthology *Children of Magic* and the French anthology *Traverses II*. Melissa is a Clarion West graduate. She assures us that her eerie first tale for *Asimov's* is only partly autobiographical.

There's a dead kitten in my freezer.
I wish it was the first, but it's not.

It's because I'm cursed. I think I'm cursed. I guess I could be wrong, but I've never been able to grow anything. Plants wither whether I water them or not. My dog got cancer. My cat was hit by a car.
And we won't talk about Tom.

The whole reason I joined the Humane Society's foster parent program was to get a mama cat and infant kittens, to watch them grow for eight weeks, then give them all back to be adopted. Mama would do most of the work; all I'd have to provide was food, water, litter, and clean bedding. A sweet deal. But I spent a year taking in sneezy adult cats before this chance finally came up. An affectionate Siamese with pale blue eyes and five kittens—two of her own, three that belonged to a motherless litter that had been brought in the night before.

Her own two babies were solid-black and gray tabby, and unremarkable. But the adopted kittens—they were gorgeous. Shades of velvety gray. Two had dark heads and necks shading to light gray hindquarters. The last was light gray with a slightly darker head. Such plush coats, even as babies.

I was amazed by their incompetence. Tiny as mice, they weren't even kittens yet, with their blunt heads and sealed eyes. They had tiny claws that wouldn't retract. Their hind legs were nearly useless.

And yet, for all that they were raw and soft as unbaked bread dough, they had lungs and opinions, and could shriek to wake the dead.

Figuratively, of course. The dead in this house sleep damned soundly.

* * *

My cat that got hit by a car? It was my car. That's why I think I'm cursed.

I walked in Sunday morning, two days after I got them, and stopped cold. A few feet from the wire crate, a kitten mewled and squirmed weakly on the carpet.

The bedding inside the crate was in a shambles. Had Mama Sky, in rearranging her nest, accidentally pushed one of her babies through the metal bars?

I picked up the kitten—one of the pair with dark heads and light hindquarters—and it was so cold, like I'd just taken it from the fridge. I could hardly think. Rushed upstairs with it cradled in my hands, grabbed the heating pad and the phone, and raced back downstairs. I folded the heating pad around the kitten right on the floor by the crate, simultaneously dialing and checking to make sure the pad wasn't too hot.

They told me I was doing the right thing, just warm the kitten up and then give it back to its mama, and all would be well.

I warmed him up and saw the others start nursing, so I scooted the chilled kitten into place on his mama's belly, by a nipple. I tried to rub his face on it so he'd know it was there. But he was too weak to nurse, and his feistier siblings pushed him out of the way.

I guess I should have done something then, but I knew mama kitty was his best shot. I fussed and waited and worried for a few hours, then finally called again and arranged to get bottle-feeding supplies. The chilled kitten looked weaker and weaker. I made sure he was in a warm spot—under Mama Sky—before taking off.

Twenty minutes there, ten minutes of instructions, twenty minutes home.

I couldn't tell at first. The kittens were nursing. I opened the crate door and Mama Sky came purring out, and I lifted squirming babies out of the way until I saw his outstretched legs. I picked him up—he was warm from the nest—but he wasn't moving. His bony ribs and hips pressed against my hand. He looked just the same as he had earlier, just very still, very quiet. I touched his chest with a fingertip, but felt only my own pulse. Was he breathing? Was his heart beating? Such a tiny life—how could I tell if it was still there?

He didn't move. Not at all. His body was even a little stiff. I just couldn't believe it, didn't want to call him dead if there was the slightest chance of saving him.

Death has always been hard for me. I could barely stand to touch Boston when he was dying of cancer, or Ruffles when she'd been hit by the car. And Tom. . . .

But with that tiny kitten—his eyes and ears still sealed, dried umbilical cord hanging from his belly—for some reason, it was different.

I started crying when he lay so still on the warm heating pad and I realized he had to be dead. I held him for a little while, touching his fur, saying good-bye. Finally, as instructed in the information packet I'd gotten from the training class, I got a Ziploc bag and sealed him into it, and that bag in a paper bag, and a rubber band around the paper bag. And into the freezer next to a box of frozen peas, until I could return him to the Humane Society for cremation.

I never even had a chance to save him—or if I did, I hadn't moved fast enough.

There is a terrifying ugliness that wells up in me when I start to feel grief, a tar pit deep inside my mind. If I tread too close, I'll get mired in it, and then I'll sink, inch by inch, into oily, suffocating blackness, and I'll never come out again.

(Oh, Tom honey. You should be here with me now, letting me lean into your warmth, murmuring to me that it'll all be okay. I've never been strong, you know that. I was only all right when I borrowed from your strength.)

Most days I can push through, alarm clock to breakfast to work to home to dinner to trash TV to bed. One breath at a time. But some days, when the loss wells up strong, I feel like I'm sliding down the inside of a glass jar, and at the bottom is that tar pit. Sometimes it feels like I can't go on, it's impossible to go on—but I can't figure out what else to do.

The foster kittens were supposed to fix that. Be breaths of life, newness, hope.

Tom shouldn't have died. He was only forty-three.

And I needed him. I need him still.

I swear that first kitten hadn't been in the freezer more than an hour that Sunday when I noticed something strange on the floor.

Boston's old rope bone.

It had been one of his favorite toys. He would chase that bone all over the house, grabbing it and swaggering around, his growl daring us to chase him. Sometimes he'd shake it like he was trying to break its spine. Tom and I would laugh so hard. . . .

I forced myself to bend down, pick it up, and carry it back to the hall closet—whose door was ajar—where I stored all of Boston's and Ruffles's things after they died. The flaps on top of Boston's box were open.

My heart felt like it was beating inside a cave of ice. His other favorite toy, a rubber squeaky ball, was missing too.

I made myself a cup of chamomile tea, with a lot of honey. My eyes hurt.

Insanity. I was going insane. I did not have a ghost dog in my house.

And yet, came the insidious whisper in the dank depths of my brain—and yet, he always was a jealous dog. Remember how he nosed between my hand and Ruffles every chance he got? How he barked when Tom and I hugged?

But that was nuts. Boston was dead and gone. And besides, I'd already fostered over a dozen sick adult cats, and none of them had died . . . but then, none were so fragile as a four-day-old kitten.

He'd been such a good dog, Boston. Adoring, funny, presumptuous. I remembered his handsome brown-and-white face, his gorgeous tawny coat, the way he would hop guiltily down from the couch when I came into the living room.

I leaned back in my chair just in time to see the squeaky ball roll down the hallway.

My eyes squeezed shut against the shot of grief. Without thinking, I dropped my hand down to my side, like I used to.

Felt fur against my fingers.

* * *

It all started forty-one years ago, when I was born. . . . That's not true. It was forty-seven years. And this whole mess didn't really start then. It started last Friday, when Mama Sky and her motley litter arrived.

Or maybe it started two years ago, when Boston died of cancer.

Or a month later, when, while coming back from an upsetting pet-loss support group meeting, I committed accidental automotive caticide.

Or four months after that, when Tom's poor, generous heart finally tired of my clingy weeping and, quietly, while he slept, checked out.

I'm sleepwalking, and moving things around.

I've developed MPD and my other personas are rifling through my dead pets' toys.

I've completely flipped my lid with buried grief, and I'm trying to fool myself into believing the spirits of the dead can awaken.

There is no fucking way there's a ghost in this house. Certainly not a dog's ghost.

But if.

If Boston is here.

If he saw me with those kittens, and grew jealous.

If he got hold of one and pulled it out through the crate's bars.

An infant kitten weighs less than a mouse. Less than a rope bone.

I have lost my mind.

I'd been like a kite, drifting around in the sky. Tom was like an island I could finally tie my string to. He kept me from straying too far. He sheltered me from storms. We met when I was thirty-three, he thirty-one. His parents scoffed at my being older, told him he could find someone younger, more beautiful, and certainly lower-maintenance. My parents nearly passed out from shock when they found out I was dating anyone at all.

Now I'm forty-seven. I barely nabbed Tom in time—I was not at the height of my prettiness, but not too far past it. Now my hair is graying, and all the dyes look artificial and make my face pasty. My knuckles look like turtle leather. I'm developing jowls, to match my puffing belly.

Tom was the only man who ever loved me. He was one in a million, one in six billion.

I don't want to die alone, but who would want me now?

I checked frequently on the remaining kittens the rest of Sunday, telling myself I was worried because one had died, not because of a ghost dog's potential interference. I cringed every time I walked past the fridge. Once, I made myself open the freezer door and look at that folded paper bag tucked into the corner.

Each time I put Boston's toys back into the cardboard box and closed the flaps, I later found the toys scattered again, the box opened.

I knew I should be scared, but I was too worn down. And I'd missed him, my little Sheltie dog. Even if I was crazy, even if I was fooling myself, it was a nice delusion.

Monday I called in sick. They're used to that from me by now. That afternoon, I brought the paper bag with its frozen corpse back to the Humane Society. They told me don't feel bad, it wasn't my fault, you just never know with newborn kittens brought in without their mom. A kitten's first forty-eight hours are the most crucial, because mama cat gives her babies immune-system builders through her colostrum.

Of course, I still felt like shit about it. Responsible. They came in alive, they should leave alive. Anything less meant I wasn't doing my job. And frankly, I felt responsible for enough deaths already, thank you very much.

By Tuesday evening, the dead kitten's lookalike—with the dark gray head and light gray hindquarters—was looking sluggish, not making an effort to stay in the warm kitten-pile. (Boston? I thought. But what could he be doing?)

I put the sluggish kitten in the middle of the pile and tried to beat down the panic inside me. Maybe he was just sleepy.

A few hours later, he was lying apart from the rest of the litter. Not moving. Not breathing.

The score was now Mama, 3; Freezer, 2.

"Boston." I said it aloud. The name echoed in the kitchen. "Boston, you have to stop. You can't kill any more kittens. If you do, I—I'll find a way to exorcise you. I'll get rid of your toys, your collar, your ashes. Don't make me do that."

If he didn't understand English in life, why the hell would he in death? But dogs understand tones. I made mine stern.

"Boston, you were a good dog. Are a good dog. But you stay out of that room, you. . . ."

My voice died. Beside the kitchen table lay a purple lump.

An argyle sock, stuffed with another, tied with string. Our homemade cat toy. I heard the faintest thrum of a purr.

I whispered, "Ruffles?"

There's a dead kitten in my freezer.

It's not the first. It may not be the last.

What the hell was going on? Thinking back, I was pretty sure I had seen no evidence of Boston until after the first kitten died.

Maybe he hadn't killed it. Maybe the kittens were dying of natural causes. Maybe their deaths were somehow waking the spirits of those who had already died in this house. But why—because they were so new, so fresh, so close to both birth and death?

Boston died first, and came back first.

Come to think of it, I hadn't found Boston's toys around today. I checked the closet—his box was closed. Untouched.

I'd lost him again.

I was furious at the tears that erupted from me. Sobbing, I slid down the wall till I was lying on the floor on my side, wailing like a maniac.

Warmth settled by my head. Fur, and purring. I closed my eyes and pretended it was real, let the avalanche of guilt and grief rip through me.

"Forgive me," I whispered. It took three tries to get it out. "Ruffles, I'm so sorry. I swear I didn't see you, I didn't know you were in the driveway!"

The soft warm rumble lulled me through my tears, and out the other side.

Wednesday morning, I put away the argyle sock toy for the umpteenth time since Tuesday evening and brought that second rubber-banded paper bag back to the Humane Society. When I got home, I expected to find the argyle sock in the doorway again. It wasn't there, nor in the hall, nor on the stairs, nor in the kitchen. I checked; it was in Ruffles's box in the closet, where I'd put it. Boston's box was still closed, too. I opened it and found his toys right where I'd put them.

The tar pit at the bottom of my mind roiled. Grew.

I'd run out of tissues days ago. Was working steadily through rolls of toilet paper now, as if there could be enough Charmin in the whole world to blot my neverending supply of tears and snot.

(Tom honey, I have never missed you so much as I do right now. The way I'd bitch and you'd just smile and say, "Oh, sweetie," the warm pressure of your thigh behind mine at night. Sometimes—oh, Tom, I'm so embarrassed—sometimes when it gets really bad, I put the heating pad on low and wrap it around a couch cushion, then snuggle my legs back against it under the covers, so I can pretend it's you back there. It lulls me to sleep, when nothing else will.)

Just breathe, I told myself. You can do this. Just breathe, and let the tears come. Watch TV, cruise the Internet, try to focus enough to read. You used to like that, reading. You have to keep going. You have to.

If nothing else, you have a responsibility to those kittens. And to sweet Mama Sky.

I never wanted kids. Talk about responsibility. But now that Tom is gone, I wonder if getting through each minute of each day might be easier if I just had something alive, something that laughed, to remember him by.

I maintain well enough, I suppose. I go to work most days. I process words in this dull legal-code-publishing office. The pay is shit, but they don't expect me to be perky and I can wear sweatpants and it doesn't matter if I haven't showered.

Frankly, I would have lost any other job by now.

The next morning, I couldn't rouse myself to call in sick. But I made myself check on Mama Sky and company.

The last adoptive kitten seemed to be doing well. I called him Cuckoo Kitten because he was growing up in another mama's nest. He was nursing, loudly opinionated, active. His light gray coat looked fluffy, healthy. He'd be a lovely cat if he grew up.

When. When he grew up. He was a tough little thing, the last survivor of his litter. At only a week old.

I thought of Tom's dear face, the way his hand cupped my cheek. His tender smile.

I left Mama Sky and the nest box outside the crate during the day. She seemed much happier, and a happy mama is an attentive mama. Mama

Sky's own two kittens were doing great, one big and black and precocious, one small and stripy and loud.

But I liked Cuckoo Kitten better. He'd had to struggle so hard to stay alive, and I loved his velvety coat and his white-marked face. So precious, so vulnerable. Such determination, all of them, squabbling over favorite nipples, voicing their objections to Mama Sky's least little shift. At a week old, they were completely dependent on her for everything. They would die within hours without her warmth, her milk.

I can't.

That first tiny death brought Boston back. The second, Ruffles.

Tom had died right in this house, right in our bed.

They would never question it at the Humane Society. The last of a weak litter. Mama Sky still had her own two fine, healthy babies, proving that it wasn't my fault.

It's just a kitten. He's probably going to die anyway; there's obviously something wrong with that whole litter. He'll fade slowly, get sleepy and still, pass gently from life into death. Really, I'd be doing him a favor, putting an end to his suffering.

No. I can't. I have a responsibility. I gave my word.

Lying in bed, I closed my perpetually leaking eyes and felt the tar pit bubbling, spreading, reaching for me. Once it got hold of me, I'd never get back out again. And I was slipping.

No. I never knew exactly why Tom had loved me, but maybe it had to do with my integrity. How could I abandon the one thing he could respect about me?

I got up, found a cushion and the heating pad, and crawled back into bed.

Seven in the morning. Faint cold light crept in through the windows. The night had crawled by my sleepless, swollen eyes, an inch at a time.

Shivering, I shrugged into my bathrobe. The house felt so still, so quiet. Eerie enough before Boston and Ruffles put in their appearances, now impossibly unnerving.

I turned lights on ahead of me as I slumped down the stairs. Put my hand to the doorknob, hesitated. Steeled myself for what I might find.

Mama Sky blinked up at me when I turned on the lights and opened the crate. She stepped out of the nest box.

Yawning, I refilled her food and water, stroked her soft head. Looked down at Cuckoo Kitten, nestled beside his two adoptive siblings.

I'll just look at him, I thought, scooping him up.

He wriggled and mewed, his tiny heart beating fast against my hands.

I shooed Mama Sky back into the crate and locked it.

Cuckoo Kitten cried plaintively when I set him down on the carpet. Mama Sky stared at me with her solemn blue eyes. I turned and left, closing the door behind me.

When you're drowning, even integrity becomes dispensable.

I climbed back into bed, my feet chilled so badly I couldn't stop shaking. Lay on my side.

Waited to feel Tom's warm thigh press against mine. ○

SCIENCE FICTION SUDOKU

This SF Sudoku puzzle, the subject of which was suggested by sudoku contest runner-up Rebecca Mayr, is solved using the letters AERIKNRST. Place a letter into each box so that each row across, each column down, and each small nine-box square within the larger diagram (there are nine of these) will contain each of these letters. No letter will appear more than once in any row, column, or smaller nine-box square. The solution is determined through logic and the process of elimination. Beneath the puzzle is a set of twenty blanks. Rearrange the following letters for a famous SF title: A, E, E, F, I, K, N, N, N, R, S, and T. The answers for the Sudoku puzzle and the anagram can be found beneath our classified ads on page 239. The solution to each puzzle is independent of the other. We've inverted the answer to the anagram so that you don't come upon it by accident.

A					I	S	T	
	S		T			R		
I	R		K	N				
N				E			S	T
		E	N		F	A		
R	A			S				E
				F	K		E	A
		A			N		K	
	K	S	E					R

DOWN TO THE EARTH BELOW

William Barton

Over the past thirty-five years, William Barton has written numerous SF works, including the award-winning novel *Acts of Conscience* (Warner Aspect, 1997) and several stories for *Asimov's*, most recently, "Harvest Moon" (September 2005). Regarding "Down to the Earth Below," he says, "When you're young, especially when you're young and spend all your free time reading SF and fantasy, the world around you is jam-packed with inviting mysteries that send a delicious little thrill up your spine. This story's big dark hole in the ground was quite real, once upon a time, and I always wondered what was down there. In my world, the hole was filled to the brim with water, and I never found out. But in some remote corner of the Multiverse, it was dry, and the version of me that was there walked right on in. . . ."

I know a place where there is no smog and no parking problem. . . .
No, wait. Let me start over.

I know a place where a man can be happy, and all the more so, the boy who was father to that man. Oh, I know. I know. Still, that bit about the friendly, hospitable people, and the beautiful women who are amazingly anxious to please?

I guess they feed us that guff so we'll get up and go to school every day, then, later on, toddle off to some pointless little over-and-over again job, until the time comes when we face the man with the shovel and don't

quite realize we never had a roly-poly little batface girl at all, much less a beautiful one who was amazingly anxious to please.

So: No Rufo. No Irish Sweepstakes. No mysterious ads read as I was whiling away my time on the French Riviera. And I'm not old enough to go be a military adviser somewhere on the other side of the world.

No, I just awoke, slow-eyed as usual, slanting yellow sunbeams pouring in through the smudgy glass of my bedroom window, warm, damp wind blowing in through the cranked open casement. They said it was an unusually cool month, August 1964, but you could've fooled me. Something to do with Hurricane Cleo building up in the Atlantic, I guess. Warm and damp, rather than the usual blazing inferno.

I sat on the edge of my bed, feet on the bit of oak floor exposed beside the ratty blue carpet my parents let me have, sat there in sweaty white jockey shorts, sat there smelling myself, wishing the floor was cold, the way it would be come winter. By which time I'll be shivering, wishing it was summery warm.

It's funny how around the time I started to grow hair in places besides the top of my head, I started to stink. I didn't used to need more than a couple of showers a week. Sunday night, maybe Wednesday too. Now . . . Hell. It's summer vacation. Anyone doesn't like the way I smell can stick it up their butt.

I pulled off the jockey shorts and kicked them in a corner, found my hand-me-down yellow chenille bedspread, the one my parents had had on their bed before they bought all new, where I'd kicked it on the floor some time during the night, used it to dry myself off. Clean underpants. Ummm . . . blue gym shorts from school, already too tight for me to use again in the ninth grade—Christ, only a month away! Clean T-shirt, the white one where I'd drawn a copy of the Royal Seal of Aceta in red and black magic marker, something like a cross between a hawk and a dragon's head in a circle. White crew socks with a red stripe around the top. Dark red US Keds.

I pulled my fingers through sweaty hair, making it stick to my scalp, a summer pretense of combing, then rummaged in my closet and got the hard hats Dad'd given me, the ones with the brass carbide miner's lamps mounted on the front. There was one for me, and a spare for Micky. I stuck an old brass magnifying glass and Granpa's old pocket watch in my pockets, and walked out through the quiet, empty house, my little sisters gone to spend a few days with Dad, Mom's door still shut, nothing but silence inside, the whisper of the wind in the windows, distant birdsong, the very far away sound of cars on Route One.

It was sunny outside as I walked down the long hill of Staggs Court, toward Carter Lane and the creek, the sky a deeper, fuller shade of blue than you expect around here in August. More clouds, too. "An unusually cool month." Down the hill, across the empty blacktop, not a car in sight, all the men long gone to work, quick through the Davidsons' yard, though no one was home, down a grassy slope, plunging into the cool, woodsy shadows around Marumscro Creek.

I stopped at the bottom of the hill, and stood looking at the water, looking down into its dark shadows, at the pebbled, sandy bottom, wondering

for the zillionth time why it was here. Good thing it is. This is where I played. Played as a kid, as a not-quite-kid now, summer and winter, spring and fall, played Barsoom with this as the river Iss, played Amtor for a while, imagining *targos* in the forest, *voo klangan* in the sky. Then that imaginary Jupiter Micky and I invented one winter with nothing better to do, Onol the mine inspector, Desta the artist-engineer, making me snicker at our lack of inventiveness, my father a geologist at the Bureau of Mines, his a draftsman for the Smithsonian.

Still, it was something, to imagine myself Onol of Aceta, to imagine myself a grown man with a job to do, not in a business suit in the rusty dusty America of 1964, but a man with a sword and diadem, inspecting the fabulous mines of Aceta, the City on the Mountain, on a vast, faraway world you could see most nights as a brilliant diamond gleam in the sky, Onol of Jupiter.

On Jupiter, I thought, suddenly silly, they wouldn't like "Hard Day's Night," wouldn't care that the silly-ass Beatles had come to America. Maybe they'd like the Animals instead, would like "House of the Rising Sun," or maybe even Bob Dylan and . . .

I started walking up the creek to the rendezvous point, rolling my eyes in self-exasperation, picturing a movie drama, with Burt Lancaster instead of me as Onol, Bob Dylan twanging away at his version of movie theme music. Jesus.

Anyway, I know a place where there's no Gulf of Tonkin, no "incidents," no President Johnson looking more like a beagle than ever as he gave some idiotic speech, no damnfool "resolution" as Dad called it. No three civil rights workers turning up dead, no boozy parish priest trying to explain *Ecclesiam Suam* from the new damn pope. No damn civil war in Cyprus, much less any truce. No damn New York World's Fair, no endless poont-poont-poont of Ringo's damn drumming on every cool FM radio station I could pick up. . . .

Deep breath.

Damn. And I can't even *remember* what happened *last* week!

By the time I got to where the creek was spanned by a fallen gray tree trunk, not far from the big old ant stump, Micky, Johnny, and Kenny were already there, Johnny's deep-as-a-grownup voice booming, "Alan! You're late!"

Johnny was a big Irish redhead, five-nine already, three inches taller than me, blue-eyed and freckle-faced, maybe a little dumber than the rest of us, though still smarter than most kids at Garfield Jr. High, which isn't saying much, I guess. Micky, just as big as Johnny, but fat and Italian, dusty-looking black hair in a buzz cut that'd grown to an inch-long mess over the summer, had already made himself a sword from one of the hardwood reeds that grew along the creek, was waving it around in a big figure-eight, "just like Tars Tarkas," thin wood making deep whoop-whoop sounds at the outside of each arc.

"Come on, let's go, Onol!" he shouted, wobbling on his feet like one of those punching-bag clown toys. He was always like that, clumsy looking, but Micky had better coordination than I did, was the only one of us who

had played Little League baseball, and was proud of his reputation as a "power hitter."

Little Kenny, barely five feet tall, who'd been poking around at the base of the ant stump, straightened and picked up one of two reed swords resting against it, gave me a credible fencing salute. He was wearing one of those old leather football helmets like you see in old movies, some Knute Rockne thing he'd gotten from his dad, who looked way too little to play football himself.

"Adar Thu of Cillpa salutes you, Onol!" He tossed me the other reed sword, which I caught somewhere in the middle, almost missing.

I heard Micky mutter, "Cut yourself?" Then he looked at Johnny. "Tengam?" Nothing. No reaction. "Hey, you! Tengam of Alaln! Ready to go?"

Johnny, bareheaded as always, gave him that baffled look he always got, and said, "I guess." Johnny always had the most trouble assuming his Jovian identity, kept calling us by our real names, right in the middle of some scene we were playing out, which always made Micky mad, arguing, when it was just the two of us, that we should leave Johnny out, find someone else to play the part of Tengam, or even make up a new character, so his neighbor Wally could play.

Johnny'd been my friend longer than anyone else though, and I liked having him around, even if he couldn't quite get into his role.

I said, "You bring the carbide?"

Micky picked up a green rucksack that'd been laying in the weeds by the creek, hefting it. "My dad had a couple of pounds left from the Fourth of July." You could hear Carl's carbide cannon all over Marumscov Village, so loud the police had come the first year they lived here, but it turned out there was no law against it.

"What else?" The rucksack was stuffed full.

"My Mom made some sandwiches. Ham and Swiss on Jewish rye!"

I glanced at Kenny, raising an eyebrow, then said, "All for you, I suppose?" Micky showed his teeth in something only halfway a grin.

I pulled the brass magnifying glass from my pocket and aimed it at him, thumb on the knurl I pretended was a trigger button. "You'll share, or face the power of the ectolens!" That got a grimace. Micky never liked the ectolens idea, preferring we use toy plastic ray guns he called "thissars." Then he'd stopped wanting to carry a toy gun on his belt, because sometimes we went in stores while out adventuring, and people would look at him funny.

Kenny picked up a small blue pack, something left over from Cub Scouts maybe, and said, "Never mind. My Mom made corned beef."

Suddenly, Johnny said, "Let's go, guys," and started walking off down the creek. No lunch packed for him, or me. Sometimes, Johnny would bring his own peanut butter and jelly along, but not today. He never would say what was wrong at his house. Anyway, my Mom was still asleep, and I never minded skipping lunch, knowing I'd get fat like my Dad if I wasn't careful.

I handed Micky the spare hard hat and lamp combo, and said, "One helmet, one sandwich; one lamp, one carbide load, right, Desta?"

More teeth, but he put the helmet on his head, and I knew he'd come

through at lunch time. I turned and followed Johnny-turned-Tengam down the left bank of the creek.

It was a beautiful day for a Jovian adventure, cool and breezy, but sunny enough, patches of deep blue sky and puffy white clouds visible through the trees, sunlight dappled here and there on the ground, lighting up shiny bits of rippling stream.

Micky and I always played here more than the other kids, so much it made us feel we owned the place. I'd played with Kenny here long before Micky moved to Marumsc Village, but it was Micky who had an imagination like mine, full of wonder worlds from books and comics. He was the first one willing to call himself by another name, and his willingness to do that made Kenny join in, so he wouldn't be left out.

I looked over my shoulder, "Hey, Mick. . ."

Another show of teeth. "Desta."

"You remember Herman and Melville?"

He got a sudden look of pleasure, and smiled. One summer, here by ourselves, we'd caught a couple of big black beetles, each one close to an inch long. We'd named them Herman and Melville, then floated them down the creek for miles on a piece of dead wood, two alien adventurers exploring The River of No Return. I was always glad we let them go, in the end.

He said, "Sure."

"You suppose they ever found their way back home?"

He shrugged, bemused, and we walked on.

We came out of the woods not far from Dinky's Cliffs, walking out into dazzling sunlight, into a hotter sort of day. The woods here were bounded by barbed wire, but it'd been cut in places a long time ago, and the field beyond was covered with tall, dry brown grass, almost like hay, cut across the middle by a footpath made by kids like us. Maybe just us? I hardly ever saw anyone else here.

Some Occoquan kids who'd lived here before Marumsc Village was built had told me there used to be a mean old bull in this field. They were full of tall tales about daring to jump the fence and be chased by the bull. Micky laughed when he heard that, said something about the bull being hamburgers by now, and didn't seem interested in my explanation about the difference between a bull and steer.

Micky and I were walking side by side now, talking about Aceta, the Cenons, and stuff, making changes in how the story went to suit the new ideas we had, which were displacing old elementary school stuff. This had all started years ago, when some teacher thought the class should write short stories as assignments. "Not less than four pages!" she'd said, to alarmed groans and complaints.

Micky and I collaborated on our two stories, "The War in Aceta" and "Revenge of the Plant Men" set on an imaginary Jupiter, then had insisted we be allowed to read them aloud to the class, one after the other. We'd been worrying at it ever since.

Lately, we'd been talking about something called "The Guardians of Jove," which started with Onol and Desta embarking on a long caravan trip, headed for the vast, unbroken mountain range of the title, which

barricaded one hemisphere of Jupiter from the other. We thought there might be many such ranges ringing the planet, possibly what caused the famous banding visible in big telescopes, and maybe the Great Red Spot was a swirling storm where part of the Guardians had collapsed.

Other things had started to intrude as well, especially in the past year or so. A lot of the stories we'd read in the Ace and Ballantine paperbacks flooding all the bookracks lately had what you might call "romantic interest." It was pretty sketchy stuff, especially in books that were reprints of things from the Thirties and Forties, but it was there.

There was also some boy-girl stuff happening around the seventh and eighth grades that was pretty hard not to notice, and Micky and I tried our hands at putting some of it in our little story fragments. Micky did a pretty good job writing an imitation of what we were reading, a scene with a man and woman bantering coyly with each other, just the way they did in stories.

I never liked admitting it, especially to him, but Micky can usually write better sentences than me, and combine them into better paragraphs. So I tried something a little different. My parents are pretty young, not even into their mid-thirties yet, and my mom's got a little sister only a couple of years older than me, though I'm supposed to call her "Auntie" when there're grownups around.

Anyway, I'm not *totally* clueless about this stuff.

So I wrote a little scene in which the boy/girl banter was a little more . . . oh, I guess *torrid* would be the word. And at the end of the scene, they wound up in what kids in school call "liplock." Micky seemed uneasy when he read it, and suggested I hide it somewhere in my room.

Somehow, that scene led to Micky coming up with an idea very different from anything we'd ever talked about before, and now he was arguing, "That stuff between John Carter and Dejah Thoris is as silly as what's in a Nancy Drew book!"

I'd never read a Nancy Drew book, and wasn't sure he had either, but I had to agree John Carter's problems with the Princess of Mars were pretty goofy. I mean, here's a man who never ages, is so old he can't remember ever being young, who's *killed* people, and he can't figure out what to do with a snotty little egg-laying princess?

"So what do *you* think we should do? Write about prostitutes?" People don't talk about this stuff in front of kids much, but when you drive through the crappier parts of Washington, D.C., which is pretty much most of it, you see those women in the shadows, and if Mom's not along, you might see your dad looking at them too. "So what're we going to call our book, Micky? *The Red-Hot Streetwalkers of Jupiter*?" Actually, I kind of liked the title.

Micky tried to look pissed off, but tittered inanely instead. "Idiot. Look, what we need are Sector Maidens."

"Huh?"

"The way we have it now, Jupiter is divided into Bands, right? By the Guardians, I mean."

"Yeah. So?"

"So what if we divide the Bands into Sectors? And what if each Sector

has a girl in it who's supposed to . . ." He made a vague gesture with his hand.

I smirked. "Christ, Micky! Where'd you get an idea like that? And why Sector *Maidens*?"

Kenny, who'd been listening, said, "Moslem Paradise."

That made Micky look mad, I think, because he'd been about to tell me he'd thought it up out of nothing. "Right. Virgins." It *seemed* like a good idea, but . . . I said, "If we ever do any of this stuff for real, I don't think we could get away with something like that. Not in a story." Not in *Amazing* or *Fantastic*. Surely not in *Analog*!

Ahead of us, Johnny turned around, and said, "You guys are nuts, you know that?" Then he said, "Anyway, we're here."

I stepped past him and stood as close as I could bear to the edge of Dinky's Cliffs, looking down at the muddy red lowland below, the yellowish expanse of the Occoquan River beyond, finally the bushily overgrown, rocky start of Fairfax County beyond that. Somewhere up there was Lorton and the big state prison, but we'd never walked that far.

Micky stepped a lot closer to the edge than me, looking straight down, something like eighty feet. "Conveyor's over there," he said, pointing.

My Dad had told me this used to be a clay pit, servicing a nearby brick factory, though that didn't seem right, somehow. I remembered he'd brought me here when I was maybe eight or nine to see the old kiln chimney, by far the tallest structure in all of Woodbridge, demolished. What I remembered was, flash! *Boom!* There'd been a hard punch against the soles of my feet, then the chimney went telescoping down on itself, disappearing in a cloud of red dust, rather than tipping over the way I imagined it would.

We got to the top of the rickety old conveyor belt, which went slanting on down the face of the cliff to the ground below, ending near the ruins of some old buildings, Micky and Johnny setting right out, pounding on down at top speed, wobbling and slipping as they went.

Kenny and I stood and watched them for a while, and when I looked at him, I could see he was pale, though probably not as pale as me. He said, "I guess if Micky doesn't fall through, we won't, huh?"

I tried to smile, but couldn't. "We better get down there before they see how yellow we are."

On the way down, I tried not to hold on too tight, feeling faint, almost like I might suddenly turn and pitch over the guardrail, screaming my way down to the mud below, glad Kenny was behind me, so I couldn't see if he was scareder than me or not. Down at the bottom, the other two were waiting, watching, Johnny's face expressionless, Micky with a suppressed smirk.

When I got there, he said, "Onol make it with dry panties, did he? Oh, *don't* shoot me with that there ectolens. . . !"

Beyond the wrecked buildings was a hole in the cliff face, a hole surrounded by a steel skeleton that'd once held some kind of winch mechanism, I think, though what was left now was a hook and dangling chain. What it dangled into was another hole, a vertical shaft, nothing but darkness down below.

Johnny grabbed the chain and leaned out, actually hanging over the shaft, peering downward into the dark. Micky picked up a round white rock of some kind and threw it in, then we all held our breaths, listening.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

Kenny, standing well back, said, "How far. . ."

John pulled back in, bending his knees to get his balance, teetering on the edge, scaring the hell out of me. "If you guys have that argument again about whether a rock would go all the way to China or hang suspended at the Earth's core, I'll *throw* you both in so you can. . ."

Micky gave him one of his looks, stepping closer. "I'm bigger than you."

"Fatter, anyway."

I said, "Cut it out guys. Let's go in."

That made them look at the horizontal tunnel opening in the cliff wall, and suddenly the shoe was on the other foot. A couple of other feet. Kenny danced around the edge of the vertical shaft and into the old mine, grinning back from the beginning of the darkness there, pulling a flashlight out of his pack and shaking it like a magic wand. "So. Onol? *Brave* Desta? *Mighty* Tengam?"

Micky said, "Silly Adar Thu. . ." but you could see he was nervous, see the little swallow as he thought about it.

I stepped in with him, and said, "Might as well get out that carbide. Anyone remember to bring a canteen?"

"Me," said Kenny.

We got the carbide lamps going, gas jets making a little hissy whine, little flame in the middle of the brass reflectors casting a pretty good yellow white glow ahead of us. I told Kenny to put his flashlight away, save it for if we got into some kind of trouble, and we walked on in.

We'd been nerving ourselves up for this all summer, ever since I'd talked my Dad into giving me the helmets and lamps as toys, hadn't done it earlier because we'd needed to argue about whether or not we should, Kenny and me for it, Micky and John against.

Now that we were in, Micky seemed to calm down looking around at wet, slimy old walls, at the big, rotten looking timbers, at the veins of color, red and green, in the gray rock walls. What were they mining down here? Clay? Doesn't *look* like clay.

Behind us, I could hear Johnny whispering to Ken, "We're just going to get *hurt* down here. What happens if there's a cave-in? You ever think of that?"

Kenny said, "You were brave enough at the top of the cliff."

"That's different."

When I looked at Micky, he was smirking again, and rolling his eyes.

I think he's always happiest if *someone's* more afraid than he is, and it doesn't matter who.

The tunnel ended abruptly, widening out into a sort of a room, with wooden walls and a wooden floor, another tunnel entrance black and empty in the far wall. Johnny stepped around me into the light, walking to the center of the room, his concerns overcome by obvious curiosity, and said, "Wonder what this place was for?"

I said, "Bunk room maybe."

Micky said, "There's a bulletin board with paper still on it over there." He took a couple of steps toward it, and stopped suddenly, looking down at his feet. Bounced a little. Stopped. "This floor's got a little give to it."

I laughed. "Maybe we better not stand too close together?"

Kenny said, "Don't stand next to Desta, anyway!"

That got a show of teeth.

Something made a low creaking sound, almost like a painful groan.

Johnny opened his mouth and took a deep breath, said, "Um . . ."

There was a loud *crack!* and he went down like he was on an elevator, straight down through the floor, posed like a statue, mouth open, blue eyes popping, curly red hair flapping like a flag as it went down in the dark.

Thump.

Nothing.

I said, "Oh, *man*. . ."

The floor made another creak, higher pitched this time.

Kenny said, "Alan?"

"Hang on." I took a step toward the hole, felt the floor shift, got down on my hands and knees and crawled the rest of the way. There was nothing but black down the hole where Johnny had gone. No help from the carbide lamp, which sputtered and flickered when I tried to look down. I took my helmet off, laying it on the floor next to the hole, and said, "Ken? I need your flashlight."

He crawled over and handed it to me, while Micky stood rooted to the floor, halfway between us and the tunnel entrance. When I took the flashlight, I could see Micky was looking at the tunnel, not me.

There was nothing down the hole but dust, all lit up in the flashlight beam, blocking passage of the light.

Kenny said, "Oh, shit. Alan . . ."

The room made a tortuous squeak, like someone pulling a hundred nails all at once, and I felt the floor start to tilt.

Micky yelled, "I'm getting *out* of here!"

The entire universe went snap-crackle-pop, and I suddenly went head down, the flashlight beam spinning crazily as I lost my grip. I think I said, "*Fuck*," heard Kenny gabble something like "Shame a yizz . . ."

Maybe something hit me in the head then.

I sure don't remember.

I opened my eyes on utter black, lying on what felt like rocks and old broken bricks, ears ringing, head spinning, smelling something like dust, something like gunpowder, something like the smell of a nosebleed. I sniffed, but there wasn't any blood in my nose, as far as I could tell.

There was a scuffling sound somewhere, something like breathing, a vague little bit of something like a whisper, a rattling sound.

I whispered, "Shit," to myself, quietly, putting a hand up to my head, my bare head, trying to sit up somehow.

I heard Kenny's voice in the dark, kind of muffled, "Hang on. I think I . . ." More rattling noises. "Jesus . . ."

I felt something in me try to boil up in a giggle as I sat on the bricks

and rocks, rubbing a lump on my temple, so I said, "Kenny, you're a Jew. You're not supposed to say that."

"Fuck you."

"That's much better."

There was a squeaking sound, another rattle, and suddenly the flashlight clicked on, shining up through yellow-lit dust, lighting up Kenny's face from below, making him look like a hollow-eyed ghoul. A ghoul in an old leather football helmet. "Damn. I thought it was broken."

He shined it over in my direction. "You okay?"

"I think so." I got to my feet, slipping on the bricks, tottering slightly. "Something hit me in the head."

Kenny put his hand up, touching the helmet. "Me too. Sure am glad I had the chin strap buckled."

I said, "What'd you yell when the floor broke? 'Shame on something.'"

He looked at me, beady-eyed. "Nothing. Something Jews are supposed to say right before they die."

"Huh. Weird."

Kenny shined the light around wherever we were, just a mess of bricks, irregular rocky walls visible here and there, big pieces of wood scattered around the floor. When he shined it straight up, all you could see was darkness and dust.

Johnny was lying spreadeagled in the middle of the floor, my hard hat sitting next to him, a few feet away. When the light was in his face, he looked dead, eyes half open, big goose egg on his left cheekbone, ribbon of black blood coming out of one nostril.

I leaned down, reached out and put a hand on his chest. "Breathing, anyway." I picked up my hardhat and fiddled with the lamp, smelled it. Apparently, the gas flow stopped when the flame blew out. Some kind of safety device. I didn't know, and realized my dad probably wasn't expecting I'd be able to get carbide and try to light the damned thing. Just a toy, nowadays.

I put it on my head, twisted the thumbscrew, heard the hiss, spun the igniter wheel. There was a little cascade of sparks and the flame sputtered to light, filling the room we were in with shadows. The first thing I saw was Micky standing with his back to one wall, dark eyes big, holding his hard hat in one hand, staring at us, silent. There was a big dark splotch on the front of his jeans, with a nice pseudopod down one leg.

I thought about repeating what he'd said to me at the foot of the conveyor belt ramp, but decided to keep my mouth shut.

When I tipped my head back, you could see the remains of the floor we'd fallen from, maybe forty feet up.

Kenny whistled softly. "I wonder why we're not dead?"

I heard Micky crunching toward us across the bricks. He stopped maybe halfway and picked something up, then kept on. "Here's your pack, Ken. Mine stayed on my shoulder all the way down."

All the way down. I said, "Canteen?" Kenny opened the pack and handed it to me, one of those flat British desert canteens like you see in World War Two movies. "Maybe if we splash some in Johnny's face, he'll come around."

Kenny said, "Worth a try."

Micky said, "I tried to climb out of here first thing. I don't think it's possible."

I thought about that for a minute, then decided to continue to keep my mouth shut. Maybe I'll bring it up, once we're safely out of this place.

When I splashed water in Johnny's face, he woke up immediately, sputtering, eyes fluttering, rubbing his face, then looking around, big-eyed and scared. After a bit, he whispered, "See? I *told* you so. I fucking *told* you!"

No way to climb up. Not even a trace of a way. No sign there'd ever been stairs or anything. No clue what this room might have been for, once upon a time. There was a dark hole, the beginning of a tunnel in one wall, nothing but pitch black dark inside. I stood at the mouth of it for a long minute, staring at nothing, my lamp lighting up dwindling rock walls, a square tunnel, not even shored up like a real mine.

Finally, I said, "I guess we better find out where this goes, huh?"

A long time later, I stood in another big, empty stone room, the third one we'd found, empty but for rubble on the floor, silent, winding Grandpa's old pocket watch, listening to the soft sizzle of the pawls. They made these things good. Grandpa's been gone, what? Three years already? And the watch goes on.

I knew Grandpa had been born in 1902, and only lived to be fifty-nine. No idea when the watch was made. Dad said Grandpa had it when he himself was a boy in the 1930s, and it wasn't new then.

Kenny was looking over my arm and shoulder, down at the watch. "How long's it been?"

"Eleven-oh-two. Fourteen hours and some."

"Jeez."

I thought about reminding him of his religious heritage again, but the joke seemed to have gone stale in my head.

Micky held up his wrist, showing off the fine gold Helbros he'd gotten last Christmas, the first calendar watch I'd ever seen. "I've got 11:10," he said. "PM"

I said, "That date right?"

He gave me a weird look. "You think we're going to be down here long enough that's going to matter?"

I gestured around the room. Irregular stone walls and ceiling. Broken rock on the floor. *Scree*. Dad would want me to use the right word. Back that way, the black square of the tunnel mouth, tunnel leading only back to the way we'd gotten in, forty feet straight up. On the opposite wall was a . . . oh, not another tunnel. Call it a crack.

Kenny said, "You think we should go down that?"

"I dunno. Micky might not fit."

Still enough spirit for him to show me his teeth, a long look, then a wry smirk. "Fat's pretty squishy, you know."

Kenny giggled, then strangled. Maybe trying not to cry?

Micky stared at him for a second, eyes dark and empty. Then he said, "I'm hungry."

"Yeah, me too." I blew out a long breath, puffing up my cheeks, feeling so nervous for a second I wanted to dance around like an idiot. "Eat."

Maybe get some rest? Move on in the, um." Right. In the morning whose light we wouldn't be able to see down here in the dark.

Johnny, facing away from us, looking at the tunnel back, suddenly said, "I'm scared."

Kenny said, "No shit."

Micky pulled open his rucksack, looked at me for a minute, sort of reached up and touched the helmet I'd lent him, then reached in the pack and dug out a square of waxed paper. "Here's your other sandwich."

Kenny said, "You want a corned beef? I got three."

"Sure. Micky, give mine to John."

Johnny shook his head, back still to us. You could see Micky's eyes light up.

I said, "God damn it, Johnny. Kenny's a runt and Micky's just a fat pig. You need to keep your strength up for me."

Softly, Kenny said, "Hey . . ."

I blew out that breath again. "I'm sorry, Ken. Christ, I'm scared as he is." But John turned and took the ham and Swiss from Micky, who had to content himself with just the one. Later, we each took a swig from the canteen, though we needed to save most of it for the carbide lamps.

Micky said, "Maybe we'll find water? The walls are damp enough."

"You want to count on that?"

You could see Micky think about trying to find our way in the dark, once the water was gone and Ken's batteries were flat. Not a good thing to think about, is it? Then we turned out the lamps to sleep, and it was the darkest fucking dark you can possibly imagine.

Somebody started to sniffle after a while, but I didn't try to figure out who.

I opened my eyes on pale blue light, groggy and confused, for just a second not knowing where the fuck I was, if anywhere. Lumps and painful spots, sharp edges under my back . . . *scree*. Like an eagle's cry, I thought, squirming slightly, then, *light*. . . ?

Pale blue light.

Light so pale it was almost as black as the abyssal midnight on which I'd closed my eyes some forever long time ago. I sat up slowly, watching shadows move over deeper shadows nothing could penetrate.

The light was coming from the crack in the far wall of the mine chamber, the crack that'd looked to me like a natural rock formation, not the work of men at all, though I'd been afraid to say that to the others. Maybe Kenny guessed.

Like luminescence, I thought. Some crud growing on the walls, pumped up by the light from our lamps, invisible to eyes used to the light from the fire. Now . . .

I stood up, quiet as can be, walked almost on tiptoe over to the foot-wide crack in the wall, staring in at the light. Not on the walls of the crack, anyway. Coming from somewhere farther away. From somewhere beyond that first bend.

"Al?" Kenny's voice.

I turned, wondering if he could see it too, opening my mouth to say something, I don't know what.

"Alan!?" Panic in that voice, then a deep, sleepy mumble from Micky, who loved to sleep.

The flashlight went on with a flare, blinding me, making me squeeze my eyes tight. I heard Johnny say, "Ken? Alan? What's going on?" When I opened my eyes again, the three of them were standing, facing me, all in a muddy sort of blur.

I said, "When I woke up in the dark, there was some kind of light."

Micky said, "Light?" His Skeptic voice, the tone that said, You're lying, Alan. I know you're lying.

I gestured at the crack.

Kenny turned out the flashlight, and there was nothing but the old original dark black nothing, the adaptation of my eyes destroyed by electric fire. Rods, cones, whatever the hell they'd told us in science class last year. Sudden image in my head of Mrs. Kooyenga, fat, smiling, hair in a bun, freckles on her face, one of the few schoolteachers I'd ever really liked, maybe because I found out I she liked Andre Norton, too, and used the word "flitter" once in class.

Kenny put the light back on, and said, "Anyway, we can't go look for it in the dark."

Micky picked up his helmet and lamp, shook it and listened. "We better reload. Kenny?" It took the last of our water, but for the one sip we each swallowed, though there was enough carbide in Micky's bag to last for a week.

I led the way down the crack, and it wasn't as bad a trip as we feared. For one thing, it was wider inside than it looked. Micky had to squeeze his belly past the rock at the entrance, but after that all any of us had to do was walk a little crabwise, leaning to the left. Anyway, trying to. I kept cracking my helmet on the rock, though not quite as often as Micky, a good bit taller than me. I don't know if Kenny ever hit his head or not. Even if he did, that leather helmet wouldn't make any more noise than John's head did the one time I heard him grunt, "Ow."

It went on for maybe a hundred yards or so, and ended just the way it began, the four of us coming out of a crack in the wall, coming out and stopping, one by one, stopping and just standing there.

That's all we did for a long damned time, until Micky said, "If you told me something like this was under Woodbridge, Virginia, I'd've said you were crazy."

Hushed. Almost in a whisper.

I tipped my head back, aiming the lamp's reflector at faraway shadows, trying to see just how far up it went. A hundred yards? Two? I said, "I don't remember us walking downhill any."

The mine entrance was maybe eighty feet below the precipice at the top of Dinky's Cliffs, and we'd fallen maybe another forty feet when the floor gave way.

Micky said, "Be funny if there was a door up there and we came out in the basement of the Drug Fair in Fisher Shopping Center."

I said, "You see a door?"

Johnny said, "I didn't know Drug Fair had a basement."

Kenny said, "What the hell is that?"

He wasn't looking upward, and when I looked where he was pointing, there was a dull gleam like brassy metal. Brassy metal, and long, thin white things, like sticks.

No. Not sticks. Bones.

It took a minute to sink in, then we all walked forward in a clump, four terrified automatons puppeting across the floor. There was a brass cuirass lying on its back, some kind of skirt made from strips of metal and scraps of dark leather, arm and leg bones sticking out about where you'd expect.

Micky said, "This stuff's kind of small, like the Spanish conquistador armor we saw in the Smithsonian."

I remembered the field trip we'd gone on together. Seventh grade? I said, "This stuff's not Spanish armor." There was a helmet above the cuirass, crested, with a nosepiece, and a plume that looked like it was made from a horse's tail. There was a skull inside, upper teeth grinning, and when I looked around, I saw a jaw lying not far away, upside down in the dirt.

Kenny leaned down slowly and picked up a thing like a scabbard, handle sticking out of one end. When he drew the short sword, its blade was slightly leaf shaped, rather than the longer, squarer sword you saw in movies. He said, "I think this is called a gladius."

When he looked at me, I said, "The leather's still soft, isn't it?"

"Yeah. You'd think it'd be . . ." He gestured at the clean white bones.

"I don't know how long cured leather would last."

Kenny slid the sword back in its scabbard and started to throw it down, stopped, staring, then bent and put it softly down by the man's side.

Micky suddenly grunted, looking off into the distance. Grunted and walked away from us, heading toward some colored glitter in the shadows. When we gathered round this next thing, it was maybe worse than the man in ancient armor. Another skeleton. Smaller. Skinnier. No armor. Swaddled in dusty, silky cloth. The colored glitter had come from a necklace of gold and gleaming jewels. Rubies. Diamonds. Emeralds. Maybe sapphires. I guess I should know which is which, though Dad does minerals, not gems. The word *corundum* popped into my head. Not carborundum. Something else entirely.

There was a slim gold diadem above the skull, laying back like a halo, though I guess it was on her when she died, and fell off as the flesh rotted away.

Felt myself try to gag at the too-sharp image in my head.

When Micky bent down and picked it up, some black strands fell away, fluttering to the ground. Hair? I tried not to gag again as he set it on his own head. There was a little wand sticking up from it, sticking up now from the middle of his forehead, tipped by the fiery gleam of a small ruby.

"Jesus! Desta, you look like you're ready to go riding on a *ther*!"

He smiled when I said it, eyes brightening in the lamplit gloom.

Thers were beasts of burden we'd invented for Jupiter, kind of like trunkless, three-legged elephants, though in our drawings they looked more like well-upholstered footstools. They were telepathic, but humans weren't, so you had to direct them by wearing a mind-control circlet.

Kenny said, "Who do you suppose she was?"

I shrugged. Ugly? Pretty? Old? Young? Fat? Skinny? "I dunno. Rich enough, though."

He said, "My Uncle Sid has a jewelry store in Manhattan. I bet he could get fifty thousand bucks for that necklace."

Fifty thousand. My Dad paid less than fifteen for our house in Marum-sco Village back in 1958.

Micky settled the circlet more firmly around his head, then put his helmet back on, lamplight guttering and hissing softly. Then he leaned down and picked up the hem of the woman's yellow silk dress, lifting it high. I felt something clench hard in my chest.

Nothing.

Leg bones. Pelvis like a clean white bowl.

I can't imagine what he expected to see.

I heard Kenny puff out one hard, sharp breath.

Micky smirked and let the dress fall back into place.

It went on like that for hours, the rest of the "day," I guess. There were hundreds of skeletons down here, scattered around by ones and twos, in little groups, and sometimes alone.

At one point, Kenny whispered, "It's like they came here together, and died together, all at once." Then he said something in Hebrew. I didn't ask what, this time.

I could see Micky turn then and stare at us, eyes big and dark.

The skeletons were all human, no dogs, goats, chickens, apes, whatever, and the ones in groups were all dressed in costumes somehow related to one another. Spanish Conquistador armor? Greek hoplites? Maybe these guys in white linen kilts and striped headcloaks were ancient Egyptians? Inane-ly, "The Streets of Laredo" started running in my head. When I was a kid, I thought the line about "dressed up in white linen" meant the cowboy was wearing one of those Mark Twain "ice-cream suits." When I asked my Dad, he laughed a bit, then sobered up and explained to me about winding sheets.

Micky kept on taking stuff off the dead people, just the way he'd taken the necklace and diadem, but I was the first one to take a sword. We came on this guy, anyway I assume it was a guy, a tall skeleton with big, thick bones, dressed up in what I swear was a jeweled Barsoomian leather harness. Gahan of Gathol?

He was wearing a thing like a parachute harness, with two swords in it, one long, one short, both curved, with hilts long enough you could take them in both hands. Your classic Barsoomian long and short swords. I recognized them, though, from reading, from museums. *Katana* and *wakiza-shi*. But this guy wasn't wearing what you'd call a *kendo* outfit.

Watching me buckle on the swords and belt, Johnny said, "Wouldn't he be kind of, um, *naked*?"

I shrugged, feeling cool in my stolen finery. "J. Allen St. John always showed them with bits of cloth here and there. Maybe it rotted away?" Maybe some other kids came by, once upon a time, and took it? If we look, will we find the skeletons of dead schoolboys somewhere, dressed up in knickers and Bobby Blake-style caps?

Micky said, "I think Burroughs wanted his readers to picture Dejah Thoris with her genitalia visible."

Genitalia. Funny how a person will be like that. Micky will say all kinds of things, but you couldn't get him to say anything more explicit at gunpoint.

Eventually, we all took swords and strapped them on, Micky picking out a long, straight Frankish sword that seemed like it was too heavy for him, Johnny picking up something that looked more like a machete than a sword, Kenny finding a rapier like an enormous hat pin that, to my vague astonishment, he seemed to know how to use, whipping it around in the air, falling into a stance with the sword tilted forward, other hand back, a stance that pretty much screamed *en garde*.

And, eventually, we were all tired again. And hungry. And thirsty. No food, of course. And no water. By then we were hundreds of yards away from where we'd come in, standing looking at another crack in the wall, no bigger than the first.

It was Johnny who said, "What the fuck are we going to do?"

I said, "I dunno. It'll take us a while to starve to death, anyway."

Kenny said, "Not that long to die of thirst, though."

That shut everyone up.

Finally, Micky said, "I'm tired. Let's take a nap or something." As I said, Micky loves to sleep. Then the lights were off, and we all stood there, staring at each other like a bunch of gooves, in the blue light from the crack in the wall.

The same blue light, I think, as I'd seen before. Just a whole lot brighter.

Kenny said, "Well, shit."

You know, there's just nothing sensible to say any more. I thought, What next? Then I walked forward into the crack, giving my head a good whack when I failed to stoop quite enough. I heard the others shuffling on after me, even heard Micky whack his helmet, probably in the same place I did mine. There was a clatter behind me then, Micky's helmet falling off because he insisted on wearing that stupid diadem under it, and it didn't fit so well anymore.

Beyond the crack was a cliff, beyond the cliff, a vista.

That's the only word I know for it.

The others came out of the crack and lined up beside me, the four of us standing on the cliff's edge, looking out at our impossible new world.

Maybe a hundred feet below us was a dark green forest, the tips of the trees waving softly in the breeze. The breeze itself was blowing in our faces, making me wonder why it hadn't moaned to us as it blew through the crack, back into the system of caves and mines.

Oh, who the fuck knows?

Dense, green forest. Beyond the forest, the bright glitter of silver water. Above the soft sound of the breeze, I imagined I could hear the sound of waves washing on the shore. There it is: that soft hiss you hear when little waves wash up the sand at the beach.

I could see hills, far away. Hills disappearing in mist. Up in the shrouded hills I could see buildings. Glittering, like buildings made of gold. The cave walls curved away from us in all directions, then disappeared in the mist as well. There was sunlight coming from somewhere.

Dusty rays of sunlight, like you see when the sun's behind a cloud, but

the light's breaking through, shining down on the landscape but not quite on you. I always imagined seeing things like that was what made old-time people think there might be something they could call gods.

Micky turned away, turned toward me, and, voice holding a familiar, querulous whine, said, "This is ridiculous! There can't be anything like this here! There can't be anything like this anywhere! Marumsco Village would fall in, if there was something like this under the ground! The Occoquan River would flood it!"

He stopped suddenly, panting, turning more, looking at the crack in the cliff face, looking like he wanted to run.

There was a loud splintery sound, not quite like breaking wood. Then the ledge on which we were standing broke free of the cliff face, and we all fell. I don't know whether I screamed or not. Just fell down and down until I went into the cool green trees.

I don't remember being knocked out or anything, but I awoke once again, awoke with my eyes shut, awoke with a pretty bad headache, with a sense of fullness in my face, with something stiff swinging around gently, banging on my ribs every now and again.

Soft breeze.

Cool on my face, evaporating sweat.

I squinted my eyes open on flickery sunlight, and leaves, leaves everywhere. Confused. What . . . arms over my head. Upside down. The world seemed to twirl, putting me in my place, making me dizzy, making me squeeze them shut for a second. That sound . . . a whisper-whine, the sound a dog makes when it needs to whine, but doesn't want anyone to hear.

Me.

When I opened my eyes again, I could see I was stuck up in a tree, wedged in the crotch between two skinny branches, way out on a limb. Dark brown trunk barely visible over *that* way, sky below my feet, invisible, ground. . . . I tipped my head back carefully and looked, expecting to see the horror of the abyss, to feel myself start to fall. My stomach lurched, but there was nothing: more branches, more leaves, that's all.

The stiff thing banging on me was the katana, hanging up my side, the wakizashi sticking out sideways, caught under one of the skinny branches. Fuck. That's why I'm caught here, instead of . . . I made myself not think about it even one little bit more. If I do, I'll want to let go, will see myself falling, screaming, ground coming up, blotting out the . . . shut up!

All right. Shutting up now. What else? Am I hurt? I could feel splinters of pain here and there. Looky. See? There's blood trickling up your left arm. You've got a cut. No broken bones, though. I know that already.

When I was a little kid, four, maybe five, with my parents in a place called Moab, in Utah, I stepped out from between two parked cars, not into the street, but up onto the sidewalk, and was promptly run down by a boy on a speeding bicycle. There was a big pain in my leg, too big to get my head around, and when my parents stood me up, I cried and kept one leg off the ground.

My mother said, "Why don't you put your foot down?" Put her hand on my shoulder.

I screamed, "No!"

My father shouted then and slapped me, and when I put my foot down on the pavement, there was a sound in my head like the spring on an old screen door being stretched and stretched. I don't know what kind of a noise I made then, but the next thing I knew I was in some kind of doctor's office, having my leg wrapped in wet plaster.

I haven't forgotten the sound in my head, or what that big pain was like.

Nothing broken then. Just cuts and scrapes and bruises, oh, my . . .

I reached up slowly with my left hand and wrapped my fingers around the thicker branch, just below the fork. Felt my hand suddenly grow weak and trembly. No you don't. This isn't gym class, where you can just pretend to be too scared and weak to play their stupid games.

I held on hard, tightening my stomach muscles, and pretty damned quick I was sitting on the branch, not hanging down anymore, feeling the fullness in my head drain away. Okay, good. Burke the Jerk always said he was just pretending, so he wouldn't have to play in any reindeer games. Now . . . there was a branch just the right distance overhead, so I stood up, grabbing it, teetering over the same abyss that had almost made me ralph a minute earlier.

Deep breath.

I walked in along the branch, always making sure I had hold of the other one, feeling it sway and dip less and less as I got near the trunk. When I was standing there, holding on to scaly brown bark, I looked down, wondering how hard it would be to pretend I could climb right down. No Tarzan here, of course. But I fucking spend all my time wandering around outside. *I ought to be able to . . .*

Christ. Idiot.

I called out, "Micky? Ken?" Well, I wanted to yell, but it came out a cracked, quavery whisper.

My blue hard hat with its carbide lamp was lying neatly on the ground at the bottom of the tree when I got there, perched jauntily on a little pile of dry leaves. It sloshed when I picked it up, and suddenly my lips were as dry and cracked as any desert movie actor you ever saw crawling through the sand. What the hell . . . I opened the reservoir cap and took a sip. Warm and brassy tasting, but . . . I upended it and drank the rest.

New man.

Life fizzled and popped inside me as I clapped the helmet on my head. Anyway. There's trees here and an ocean nearby. There'd be a little creek somewhere and I could refill it then. Assuming I ever needed carbide gaslight again. This sunlight . . .

It was coming down through the trees nicely, dappled on the leaf mold and dirt under foot, as pretty as you please. Yellow sunlight. Now how do you suppose . . .

The trees came to an end eventually, me stopping at the edge of the darkling woods, looking out over a sea of tall grass, grass blocking my way. I'd been walking for an hour according to Grandpa's indestructible pocket watch, calling out names, Micky, Kenny, Johnny, then, feeling more or less like an idiot, Desta, Adar Thu, Tengam.

Nothing.

Just the sigh of the wind in the trees and the maddeningly remote hiss and thud of the sea.

I found that creek of mine flowing out of the woods and into the tall grass. I kneeled beside it, holding my helmet, meaning to refill the lamp, meaning to have another drink. The water was dark brown and, when I picked some up in my cupped hand, kind of oily looking. Iridescent.

Well, you remember, don't you?

I'd been walking along the Marumsc Creek with a couple of boys, boys I hung around with before the Micky-Kenny-Johnny gang formed, Tommy and Gilbert I think their names were. Rough boys. Mean boys. Boys my parents didn't want me to know.

We'd drunk from the creek that day, and some time later, I split off the other two, heading home on a steamy summer afternoon. I started to feel dizzy and funny, and laid down on the sidewalk, marveling that the cement could feel so cool right out in the hot sun like that. I remember I made it home, but my parents found me sound asleep on the floor when they got back around dinner time, sleeping away, red faced and blazing hot, underneath the piano.

I never heard if the other two got sick or anything, but Tommy died a year or so later, from leukemia. The doctor, making one of the last house calls I remember anyone getting, gave me a bunch of penicillin, calling it tonsillitis. I never told anyone about drinking from the creek.

Stupid now or stupid later?

Thirsty now *and* thirsty later?

I stuck my tongue in it, then spat hard, scrubbing my lips on the back of my hand. "Jesus," I whispered, "talk about toilet water. . . ." That made me giggle. Okay, the sea sounds closer, off to your left. *Walk*.

Maybe another hour and I came to the beach, white sugar sand sloping down to impossible turquoise water under a burnished blue sky, white-caps far out, small rollers tumbling closer in, flat waves hissing up across the sand, making it maybe halfway to the end of the grass, then pulling back.

How the fuck, I thought, could there be an ocean under Woodbridge, Virginia?

I tipped my head back and looked up at the sky, trying hard to peer through the blue, to see the rock ceiling I knew *had* to be there. The sun was a fierce white hole to nowhere, hanging as if pasted to something, halfway down to the horizon, maybe more.

I looked away, dazzled.

Okay, it's not Pellucidar, anyway. No perpetual midday sun. No upcurving land . . .

As I blinked away spots, I looked up the beach, following the shoreline out of sight with my eyes. Beyond the grass, beyond the forest, the hills we'd seen from the cliff were still there, still full of mist, golden city still glittering like a mirage. Cliffs . . .

I spun, looking the other way. *There!* Still there. The cliff wall towered up and up, and there was the little black crack from whence we came, a white scar on the rock below it, where the little ledge had been. Above the crack, the escarpment went on higher, for hundreds, maybe thousands of

feet, ending on a sharp, jagged line, only blue sky and delicate tissue clouds beyond.

No cavern wall, I thought. No ceiling.

Not anymore.

Then the sea hissed softly, and I forgot about everything else. Took off my hard hat and threw it on the sand. Toed off my Keds, pulled off my socks, unbuckled my sword harness and dropped my shorts on the ground, pulled off my T-shirt with the Device of Aceta blazoned in magic marker, and stood there in my tight, white, Johnny Weismuller briefs.

Stood for just a second, then ran for the water, white sunlight prickling hard on my naked back.

The seawater was cool, not cold, a little better than the water in Ocean City at the end of summer, not quite so warm as the water in Myrtle Beach a few hundred miles to the south. I'd always liked Ocean City better, but my parents insisted on Myrtle.

And it was real seawater too, salty when it got in my mouth, salty like sweat, too salty to drink.

I stood up, underpants plastered to my skin, flinging my bangs out of my eyes, taking a deep breath, gentle breeze suddenly cold on my wet skin, giving me goosebumps everywhere. There was a shadow on the water, reaching out toward me from the beach. I followed it up, dreading what the shape implied, already rehearsing a Friday scene in my head, when I . . .

Maybe she was taller than me, maybe not. Tall though. Thin. No, not thin. Slim. That's the word I want. Short red hair in what I think girls call a pixie cut. Head cocked to one side, staring at me with a half smile literally playing on her lips, just like in some damned story or another. Something like the halter top you saw on older girls in the summer. Bumps. Right where . . . my eyes went the rest of the way down by themselves, snatched themselves away on their own as well.

Harem pants, they call those.

Diaphanous. That's the other word you'll be wanting.

And I thought I could see . . . oh, dear. And me in my wet cotton briefs. I walked straight out of the water and up the beach right then, walked straight to my clothes, red-headed girl padding barefoot right beside me, standing there smiling while I put them on.

"?" she said, when I was done, seawater from my underpants starting to soak through my shorts already. Not a word I knew, just a syllable, random phonemes, nothing more.

I smiled brilliantly, and said, "Um-cluck . . ."

She laughed, just a plain old laugh, tapped her chest and said more syllables.

Me Tarzan, you Jane? I felt like I wanted to turn right then and run away, dash off into the grass or trees and run and run, or maybe throw myself into the big blue sea and swim away to the impossible horizon.

Instead, I had the wit to tap myself on the chest. "Alan."

Puzzled look.

"Alan Burke."

"Baww!?" A very amused and disbelieving look.

Makes me sound like some kind of poultry.

Meanwhile my eyes kept trying to creep on down and take another look at the diaphanous bits. That got an amused look too. And made me keep my eyes higher as I felt myself start to blush.

Well. How about . . . "Onol," I said.

She clapped her hands, "Onol!"

Okay. Good. "Onol of Aceta." That's me.

And she said, "Ah-see-tah!"

It never sounded so good before. I confess it always seemed like a dumb name before. Aceta. As in vinegar. As in aspirin.

She clapped her hands again, looking me up and down with a big smile, the whitest teeth I ever saw in my life, whiter than movie star teeth, and where *her* eyes lingered.

I remember the first time I got a hard on in class. Math class it was, and not all that long ago. I remember I tried to keep on paying attention, but one of the other boys reached out and tapped me on the shoulder, whispering, "Calm down, Burke. You gotta stand up and walk outta here in ten minutes!"

God knows what he was doing looking under the writing panel of my desk. I never asked. But the teacher did want to know, right then and there, just what I found so funny about quadratic equations.

In the wonderful here and now, the smiling, red-headed girl with the big white teeth turned away, motioning me to follow, and walked off up the bright white beach, just as the sun, sinking behind the escarpment, began casting ever longer shadows.

And follow her I did, hypnotized, delirious, reduced to idiocy. Not too much idiocy, however. Pretty soon it dawned on me I was walking behind her and, unobserved, I could look where I wanted.

By the time we got to where she'd set up camp, just below the dune line, where a crystalline creek was flowing out of the grass and down into the sea, cutting a gully in the beach, the sun had gone down behind the escarpment. It was pitch black for a few minutes, then a moon came up, rising from the spot where the sun had gone down moments earlier, peering over the cliffs like a gleaming, copper-colored eye.

No stars.

And maybe the moon is just the sun, turned down low and reversed on its track? Damn. Everyone knows the Sun and Moon cross the sky in the same direction! Don't they? Up in the hills, the golden city was hidden by darkness and deep shadow, but you could still make it out, sort of, the shapes of building picked out by little flecks of red. Firelight?

Dad took me to a theater once, so I could see the stage crew setting up for a performance of some Gilbert and Sullivan thing or another. "Pirates of Penzance," maybe? I don't remember. Maybe this was just like that.

I shivered, not wanting to believe I was in movie make-believe now.

The red-headed girl pulled up the legs of her harem pants, bending over to reach her ankles, then waded out into the stream, stooped again, and cupped a handful of water to her lips. Watching, I had to recover for a minute before I could think to kick off my Keds and socks, then follow her

into the water, glad I had on shorts and didn't have to bother with trying to roll up my jeans.

The water was cold, more goosebumps for me, and sweet, and when I looked up from drinking, the girl was looking at me, showing those teeth again.

Hell, I never was much good at talking to girls, so what difference does it make if I can't talk to this one?

I felt the short hair at the nape of my neck stir, coupled with an intense realization that I *wanted* to talk to her. Thought again about the difficulty John Carter had had, trying to make sense of Dejah Thoris. Tarzan didn't have so much trouble with Jane, did he? Of course not. Tarzan was such an intelligent and thoughtful ape-man; not a galoot like the Warlord of Mars. Or maybe it's just that D'arnot had made him into an urbane Frenchman after all, where John Carter was no more than a Virginia redneck?

I shook off my little book reverie, just my scaredy-pants mind trying to run away, one way or another, and smiled back at her, hoping she wouldn't recoil from my snaggly teeth. When I was maybe four years old, I fell on a flight of brick stairs and bashed out my upper front baby teeth. When my permanent teeth came in a couple of years later, they looked like hell, a little misshapen, all slightly turned off true in their sockets, one of the incisors distinctly yellow.

No one ever took me to get them fixed.

Nothing but a smile in return, the redhead stepping closer to me, big eyes on mine, looking ever so interested. "?"

"Yeah, right." I said, "Okay. *Sprechen sie Deutsch?*" I don't know what the hell I would've done if she'd said, *Ja!* I learned a little German by reading through the first seven lessons of my father's old college text, but had given it up when they switched from Roman letters to *Fraktur*.

She tipped her head to one side. "?"

"Great." Then, turning to a complete idiot, I said, "*Hola, Isabel. ¿Como estas?*" Nothing? "*¿Se me olvido el cuaderno?*"

That made her laugh.

Just as well. I didn't start Spanish yet, though I suppose I'd have to in September. Micky started a year early, though, and I'd picked up a little out of his ramblings. *¿Donde se queda la biblioteca?* Right?

She walked out of the water then and up the beach to her pile of gear, me stumbling along in her wake, forgetting to grab my Keds, eyes glued to her backside regardless of what I wanted them to do. She started a fire with something that went *sparkle-flash*, then conjured a frying pan and some kind of trivet from nowhere.

Christ. I don't *remember* seeing a foldbox, but there must've been one somewhere. Suddenly, there was hamburger sizzling in the pan, having been somehow kneaded into perfect patties. Then a little tray on short legs she pressed into the sand. Two plates. Buns. Ketchup. Mustard. Sweet relish. Sliced onions.

Then she sat down cross-legged in the sand, patting a place opposite her, hamburgers frying away, drowning out the sudden sound of crickets in the grass. I sat down awkwardly, almost falling, too busy thinking, There *must* be a better word than diaphanous. . . .

Long pause, just me and her smile. She looked up, looked over me, looked back down the beach the way we'd come. Then she stood up. I managed to get up too, managed to turn and look, some kind of dread squirming in my guts.

Kenny, looking all bedraggled as he walked toward us across the sand.

I felt a moment of intense relief, followed by, *God damn it. . .*

He said, "Alan . . ." then seemed to stagger when he got a good look at the girl. "Jesus!"

I pointed at him, half turning to the girl, and said, "Kenny."

She frowned. "*Grrnnee?*"

Right. Better than *Bawk*, anyway. So I said, "This is my old friend, Adar Thu of Cillpa."

"Ah-dahr Thoo . . ." she said, and "*Seel-pah!*"

I think we got Cillpa from Silly Putty or something. I said, "She doesn't speak English, and can't say our real names."

He looked her up and down, eyes stopping here and there, then said, "I don't think she needs to!"

I felt something odd curdle in my throat. "Kenny."

He looked at me for just a second, eyes hard and judgmental, then said, "Right." He looked away for just a second, and when he looked back at me, everything was all right again.

Kenny's got two older brothers, twin brothers, just graduated from high school, about to head off to college. Sometimes I realize he knows a whole lot more about stuff than I do.

Now, he said, "No English, huh? *Du bist a Yid?*"

I said, "Funny, she don't *look* Jewish!"

"Asshole."

"Yah. Anyway, I already tried German and Spanish on her."

"I might know a little Russian. . ."

The girl rolled her eyes, in exasperation, I think, and said, "???"

Kenny twitched, popeyed. "*Hebrew?* You speak Hebrew?" Then he said a string of those guttural syllables.

The girl replied in kind, sort of in kind, anyway, her guttural syllables a good bit spittier-sounding than Kenny's had been, and I felt any number of odd pangs crawl through me. And I felt glad when I could see Kenny didn't really understand what she'd said.

"Oh, maybe not. What the hell. . .?"

I said, "You do speak Hebrew, don't you?"

He shrugged. "My parents aren't Zionists, and we don't speak that Modern Hebrew they use in Israel. All I know is the Biblical Hebrew I had to learn for my Bar Mitzvah."

"Great." I made it sound sarcastic, not wanting him to know I was glad he couldn't talk to her either.

She looked him over carefully, then said, "*Khah-bee-roo.*"

That made him uneasy. "Maybe she speaks Canaanite? That was pretty close to Old Hebrew."

She said, "*Khah-nah-nee.*"

I said, "Maybe she's a Phoenician!" That'd be cool. Or a Carthaginian? Cooler still.

Kenny said, "I don't think they had any red-headed Canaanites."

"Try that Russian now." Crossing my fingers it wouldn't work.

Kenny said, "Voo-ee go-vo-ree-tee . . ."

The girl, laughing, put up her hand, palm toward him, and turned away to tend the fire and frying pan. Bending over, then squatting to take up cooking utensils that'd appeared just as magically as everything else, like some invisible sprite was putting them out when she needed them, and not before.

Watching her, Kenny said, "She doesn't have anything on under those slacks, does she?"

"I don't think so."

He looked at me. "Doesn't require much thinking."

It turned out she'd made enough hamburgers for Kenny too, as if she knew he was coming. In fact, she had made just the right number, enough hamburgers we could eat 'til we were full, but not an overstuffing bite more.

Kenny said, "You get any kind of name out of her?"

I shrugged. "Nope. Could be Dah-ee-lah for all we know . . ." Dah-ee-lah was the name of Onol's girlfriend in "The War in Aceta," his wife already in "Revenge of the Plant-Men."

Her eyes flamed with pleasure then, and she cried, "Dah-ee-lah?" More spitty syllables, hissed through big white teeth in a big white grin, followed by another, "Dah-ee-lah!"

"Okay. Dah-ee-lah it is!" When I looked at Kenny, I think nonplused was the right word.

A little later, she gave us each a dark green wool blanket, pretty much the same as the Army blankets my dad sometimes brought home from field trips. Kenny and I laid down on opposite sides of the fire. When the girl laid down, she came over by me. Not touching me. Not so close I could reach out and touch her or anything, but on my side of the fire.

I felt unaccountably good about that.

Tried not to think about much of anything else.

I laid there then, not quite able to sleep, staring up at the starless, velvet black sky, watching a dull copper moon sail overhead, and wondered just what the fuck could possibly be going on.

Whenever I glanced over at the girl, she was lying on her side, eyes open and looking at me. Somehow, sometime, I managed to sleep, but I sure don't know how.

The sun was a pale yellow spark rising out of the sea, from just where the moon must've set, when I woke up the next morning, long slanting rays lighting up the beach, the grass beyond, treetops of the forest, the blinding white expanse of the escarpment, looking just the way I imagined the White Cliffs of Dover looked before I saw the real ones in a movie.

My dad always says, "That's life," when I talk that way. Things are always better in your imagination, he says, and . . .

I sat up hard, head spinning, looking around wildly, at the campfire, at Kenny's inert form humped under a green wool blanket. In the hills beyond the grass, there was the City of Gold, though, already looking like so

much metallic glitter in the sunlight, the last of its red window fires winking away.

No girl.

No . . .

Then I turned toward the creek, and there she was, sort of crouched down in the water, picking up handfuls of the stuff and dribbling it on her head. On the sandy bank of the creek, her harem pants and halter top lay neatly folded.

I felt my teeth wanting to chatter, though they didn't quite manage to do so.

I felt my self grow very wry indeed, inner voice tittering as it said, Jeez. You'd think a boy who was going to be fourteen years old in a few weeks would be able to manage this a bit better.

So I made myself walk slowly, very quietly, to the edge of the stream, agonizingly self conscious, but . . . yeah, right. *But*. Me. Me in all my terrified glory. Another inner voice pointed out, quite reasonably, that I *wasn't* a grown-up yet; not even an eleventh or twelfth grader who . . . Didn't do any damned good.

She looked over her shoulder at me and grinned, then stood up and turned around, water barely coming to the middle of her thighs, and gestured for me to join her.

I don't *think* I wanted to faint, but my feet sure as hell grew long roots just then, reaching far down into the sand. What the hell is wrong with you, Burke? Take off your God-damned clothes and get in there! She can already *see* you've got a hard on. Look at that *smile*!

My teeth chattered loud enough I'm sure she could hear it.

She laughed and cupped up a double handful of water, throwing it toward me in a long, shimmering arc, like diamonds in the air, but it seemed to evaporate on the way, not getting me wet.

Then she walked splashing out of the water and up onto the beach, shook herself like a slim, beautiful dog, and put on her clothes, me standing there like some *retard*, watching for every glorious second.

Back up at the camp, Kenny was awake and sitting up in his blankets, owl eyed. Looking at me, he said, "If it'd been me . . ."

I said, "Right. Would you have peed your pants or merely been struck blind?"

He grimaced, and said, "I was thinking maybe a pillar of salt."

I said, "I've been dreaming about something like that happening for the past three years. Wish I was a little older."

"You think that would've helped?"

"Beats me."

"My brothers talk about it some. I think it's supposed to be a little more gradual than . . ." He gestured at the beach. "You know. Dates. Kissing. Stuff you do in the dark at the movies."

I'd read a sexy novel about it one time, some girl who lets things get out of control in an old-time movie theater balcony, then gets caught by the ushers. It seemed pretty silly, but still . . .

There was a sizzle from the reinvigorated fire, as the girl, Dah-ee-lah or no Dah-ee-lah, loaded up a frying pan with little link sausages and

fine, round eggs. They turned out perfect, and I only wondered for a second where she was hiding the refrigerator.

A part of me wanted this all to be real. Some other more sensible part wanted me to wake up in bed and realize I was late for my meeting with Micky, Kenny, and Johnny down at the creek. That woke up a third part of me that, ever so briefly, wondered what'd become of Desta of Aceta and Tengam of Alaln.

After breakfast, the girl collected the wool blankets and laid them one atop the other, took our dirty plates and the greasy, still-hot frying pan, piled them together in the middle, and then started folding and folding. I must've blinked at the wrong time, because I missed what happened, and the stuff was gone, girl grinning and dusting off her hands. Kenny was standing there looking like his dark, curly hair wanted to straighten out and stand on end.

"What happened?"

Owl eyed again, he looked at me and said, "Beats me."

She put her hands on her hips, big eyes on me, made an after-you gesture, and said a few words in maybe-Canaanite.

"Kenny?"

He shrugged. "Hard to say. I think maybe she wants us to go that way."

I smiled back, doing my best to seem like I deserved the way she was looking at me, and said, "After you, Alphonse!"

She cried, "Dah-ee-lah!"

"Oh, right. After you, Dah-ee-lah."

Kenny muttered, "Alphonse. Dummy."

But the girl turned away, leading us through the creek, getting our sneakers soaking wet at last, then up a path into the long grass I hadn't noticed before. I said, "Did you see this last night, Ken?"

"It was dark."

"Right."

"Maybe it wasn't here."

Maybe so.

He said, "Nice scenery, anyway."

Watching the girl walk ahead of us up the trail, I had to admit he had a point.

We walked on for two, three miles, maybe more, as the sun mounted into the sky and whitened, blazing down on us, making us sweat and pant. Didn't seem to bother Dah-ee-lah, of course, her short red hair fluffy as ever, where mine was plastered down the sides of my face and Kenny's mass of curls retreated to tight black knobs.

I wouldn't have minded if she'd gotten a little sweaty, of course. Diaphanous cloth is more transparent when it's wet.

Beyond her, above the waving stalks of grass, you could see the misty hills starting to loom ahead of us, City of Gold shimmering, winking in and out among the drifting clouds. Funny clouds, seeming to emerge from the air and sink toward the ground.

"Like habitation fog," I whispered.

Kenny said, "I was thinking the same thing, but it's gotta be at least a hundred out here."

Maybe it's cold in them thar hills? I was going to say it, but the girl stopped in her tracks, spun, and looked beyond us, grin vanished, mouth opening in an *oh* of surprise.

Made me look.

The men were running toward us, waving long curved swords over their heads. Swords with basket hilts. Cutlasses. Men with long hair and big black beards. Men dressed in floppy-top boots, with dopey-looking tricorne hats. Men with striped shirts and long socks that came up to their knickers.

Kenny said, "*Shit.*" Then he whipped out his rapier and fell *en garde*, just the way he had in the cave under the abandoned mine, not all that long ago.

All I could do was wobble on my feet, and squeak, "*Pirates?*"

The lead pirate cried out, "Arrrrgh! Ye're a thoroughly modern Jew! No oy fer yew! Long John Silver will soon fix yer wagon!"

I thought, Okay. Kenny's about to be killed by Wallace Beery . . . no more time. I drew my two swords, katana on the right, wakizashi on the left, and tried hard to remember if I knew anything at all about *bushido*. Nope. Nothing but the word itself. The first pirate to come my way, a skinny, dorky-looking little guy with brown and rotten buck teeth, whanged me over the head with the flat of his cutlass. I sprawled backward into the long grass, head spinning and throwing off bits of sparkly white light, swords flying out of my hands, tumbling end over end away.

I think maybe I said, "*Ow!*" Or maybe I just imagined it.

Wallace Beery dodged under Kenny's long, flickering blade, and slapped him aside with the back of one black-gloved hand. "Arrgh!" Nothing more, nothing less.

Then he moved on to Dah-ee-lah, tossing his cutlass aside, grabbing her with both rough hands. "Now, me hearties!" he cried. "*Now* we'll have some sport!"

I rolled over, gagging, head spinning, inner voice yammering, Get up! You've got to get up! But my head twirled round and round and threw me back down on the ground. No use. Sorry, Dah-ee-lah. Sorry, whoever you are.

I remember, in my fantasy land, I always wanted to see something like this. See it happen, fly on the wall.

Here and now, I changed my mind.

Struggled to get up. Gagged. Realized my nose was bleeding, that my ears felt wet, that I might have a fractured skull, might be very badly hurt indeed.

No excuse.

And now, you have to watch.

Good work, Burke the Jerk.

Wallace Beery had her by the hair, picking her up off the ground, and, glimpsing her face for just a second, I could see she was calm, wasn't scared, wasn't worried at all.

Made the jelly of fear in my guts seem all the worse, right now.

He put one rough hand on the waistband of her harem pants, and gave them a good downward yank.

Silence.

Tableau.

Collective gasp from the pirates.

I remember thinking, What the *fuck*? Then shying away from that last word, seeing it in a different light just then.

One of the crewmen, maybe the skinny, dorky-looking little guy who'd whipped me so easily, screamed, "Cor blimey! Hit's the *Untouchable*!"

Dull thought, simmering somewhere in my ringing, spinning head: Blimey? Did he just say *blimey*?

Suddenly, Dah-ee-lah was standing in a circle of pirates, hairy, rough and ready men shrinking back as she pulled up her pants, eyes blazing, reached out one hand like a witch's claw, and shouted, in ringing tones, those spitty, guttural words.

A curse, I thought. An honest to God *curse*. . .

The skinny crewman spun, landing a roundhouse slap across Wallace Beery's bearded chops, knocking him spraddle-legged on his ass in the dirt. "Ye've laid yer filthy paws on the *Untouchable*! We're all *dead* men!"

There wasn't enough room on the trail for all the pirates at once, and I thought for a second they would jam up like Stooges, trampling one another in their zeal to run away, but it was only grass, and they spread out, splashing and slipping in the muck, falling down, getting up, running away, screaming as they ran.

Screaming for mercy.

There was a soft, whistling moan then, from everywhere, all at once.

Wallace Beery, still sitting at Dah-ee-lah's feet, grew short, dense yellow quills, looking for all the world like a man stuck all over with newly sharpened pencils.

He said something like, "Oh, darn . . ." and flopped over on his back.

Dah-ee-lah seemed to smile.

More moaning and whistling and I could hear the pirates scream. Scream for mercy. Scream for salvation. Too late.

Kenny came out of the grass then, eyes downcast. Stooped and picked up his rapier, wiped it off on the leg of his shorts and slowly slipped it into its scabbard. "Thought I knew how to use this," he said. "Guess five lessons weren't enough." It sounded sensible, but his eyes were so very far away, feverish, almost blind.

Dah-ee-lah helped me to my feet, steadying me as I staggered, blinking away new stars, wishing the ground would keep still for just a second.

And then there was a tiny, piping voice from somewhere nearby, "Is your ladyship unharmed?"

I didn't want to look, but I did anyway, and there was a little mouse, no more than three inches tall, standing on his hind legs, dressed in Lincoln green, complete with a tiny feathered cap. The thing in his hand was a little bitty longbow, a quiver of little yellow arrows peering over his shoulder.

Behind him, more mice came out of the long grass, like men emerging from a darkling wood, behind them more mice still.

The thudding sound I heard was Kenny fainting dead away on the ground.

* * *

As the sun set toward the White Cliffs, shadows lengthening all around us, we marched on through the long grass toward the City of Gold, a squad of Merry Mice on point, Dah-ee-lah next, fetching as ever, she and the Mouse Commander squeaking away at each other, Kenny and me in the protected middle, another squad of mice making up the rear guard, mousy scouts rustling in the grass.

I imagine the ticks and sand fleas and smaller flies could still sneak up on us, but not much else. I'd stopped wondering if any pirates had survived. Wallace Beery sure as hell had not, laying there like some vast yellow porcupine while we were reviving Kenny and getting on our way.

Here and now, Kenny whispered, "I don't care what it *seems* like, you idiot. It's *got* to be a dream! *Look!* Magic mice? A fifty-mile-long cavern with an *ocean* in it under Woodbridge? Not to mention us surviving a hundred-foot fall. . . ."

I tried to imagine where he'd come up with that fifty-mile figure. I mean, look: it's the *sky*. I said, "How do you imagine we're dreaming the same dream, Adar?"

He grimaced, looking away. "My name's Kenny, not Adar Thu of Cillpa." I shrugged. "You can be Kenny if you want. My name's Onol. Onol of Aceta."

"Right. Onol of Aceta. And the girl with the see-through pants is the lovely Dah-ee-lah herself."

"So, what are you saying? We fell down a hole and bonked our lil ole haid, and now we're having a shared dream? Telepathy or something?"

He sighed. "*Somebody* is having a dream."

"So I'm knocked out, knocked out and dreaming, and *you're* a figment, maybe the voice of sweet reason trying to wake my ass up?"

His turn to shrug. "Either that or I'm dreaming and you're a blood clot in my brain trying to make my death an easy one."

"Jeez! *That's* pretty creepy."

"Yeah."

I gestured at Dah-ee-lah. "Maybe it's *her* dream, and we're *both* figments?"

"So who's she? Some girl from school dopey enough to be having a wet dream about the likes of us?"

"Girls have wet dreams?"

"How the hell do *I* know? I only started having them myself last year."

The sun went down and the moon came up, bright as a new penny in the empty, starless sky, red fires winking on one by one in the windows of the City of Gold, clearly *much* farther away than it'd seemed earlier. We'd been walking all day, and had to've come at least fifteen miles.

Not long after that, the girl, Dah-ee-lah, the Untouchable, as the now-dead pirates had called her, dropped back to walk between Kenny and me. I looked over her head at him, wondering why he didn't want to be Adar Thu anymore, wondering why he wanted this to be a dream from which he could wake up.

Then I wondered why I could look over her head, when she'd seemed a bit taller than me only this morning. Are you taller too, Kenny-boy? Don't look it. Do I? Or is she just shorter than she seemed?

I suddenly realized, looking down at the top of her head, I could smell her, a soft, subtle scent, not like the perfume my mom wore, not the flat kid-smell of my sisters, not much like anything I ever . . .

I backed away a bit, remembering I hadn't had a shower in a couple of days *before* we set out for Dinky's Cliff, and had been sweating like a pig for however long it'd been since then. I bet I smell like an old goat. An old *dead* goat.

She maintained her distance as we walked, until I'd retreated as far as I could and was about to start tripping over stalks of tall grass. Her hip bumped against mine just once, then she pulled back a bit, giving me room to walk. Shorter than me . . . Are girls' legs longer than boys' in relation to their height?

She reached out and touched me on the wrist, a quick little lick of sensation tingling in the fluffy hair I had growing there, what Mickey had referred to as my "wrist manes" on a day when he was referring to me as Apeboy, like a joke that didn't quite work.

I tried not to jump out of my skin, but failed. She was looking up at me, eyes no more than little glints of moisture in the quasi-dark, almost hidden by brows and bangs.

I took a breath, determined not to strangle on my tongue any more than was absolutely necessary, and said, "How come you speak English now?" She and the Mouse Commander had been squeaking away in it off and on, all day long. Not exactly English, the vowels all converted to long ee-sounds, but close enough.

She said, "I always did. You just didn't know how to listen."

"Um." No idea what that could possibly mean.

She reached out and took my hand in hers, lacing our fingers together in some unfamiliar way, and we walked on for a while like that, all my thoughts and wondering suspended.

Some time later, we got to the Merry Mouse camp, just where the grassy plain gave way to the beginning of those faraway hills. There were trees here, though scattered in groves, no forest anywhere nearby, and we could no longer see the City of Gold, its buildings hidden by the rising bluffs.

Here, there was a little mousy tent city, lit by little mousy fires, mice cooking God-knows-what on little rotating spits.

What do mice eat? Grain from the House that Jack built? When we lived in Connecticut and Dad was still in college, our apartment had rats. Rats eat anything, I was told, including little boys. Later on, when we lived in Utah, I heard there were carnivorous predatory field mice around somewhere, but I never saw any.

They made a bigger fire for us, safely away at the edge of Mouse Camp, where Dah-ee-lah unfolded our green blankets again, taking out miraculously cleaned frying pans, already full of steaks and home fries, ready to go on the fire, miraculously cleaned plates and silverware ready once again for our use.

I said, "Dah-ee-lah?"

She looked at me, attentive.

"Why did the pirates call you the Untouchable?"

She smiled. "Because that's who I am, and everyone here knows it." The

smiled broadened a bit. "Once they bother to *look*, that is." Poor, old Wallace Beery.

I think maybe it was the look on my face made the smile turn to a laugh.

Sitting on a blanket nearby, waiting for his dinner, Kenny snickered. "So much for that," he said, sounding happy about it.

I felt that wry inner feeling spread to my face. "Yeah. I was hoping it only meant she used to work for Eliot Ness or something."

But I'd been afraid all along it meant exactly what it seemed to mean. Afraid? Or glad? Don't know. Anyway, she sat next to me, on my blanket, all during dinner, sitting close enough I had to be careful not to elbow her in the head. I couldn't think of anything witty to say while we ate, and anyway my parents' ideas about table manners started banging around in my head, making matters worse.

Elbows off the table. Don't chew with your mouth open. For that matter, don't talk while you're eating. Tip the soup *away* from you if you really need to get the last bit. That way it doesn't wind up in your lap. Better still, leave the last bit. You want people to think you're starving or something? Hold the fork *this* way. . . .

Every time I looked at Dah-ee-lah the Untouchable, she was looking up at me, smiling.

It was during dinner that the Mouse Commander told her all about the bad tidings of the Land Down Under. I wondered if he meant Australia for a minute, but it was this place. Makes sense, I guess.

Anyway, something bad had happened in the City of Gold, something to do with a revolution, the Good King killed, the Evil High Priest in charge, the winds of terrible change abroad in the Land, something to do with the Coming of a New God.

Somewhere along the way, I had a prickle of foreboding, of foreknowledge, the word *adumbration* popping into my head unbidden, remembered from English class last year, teacher's voice yammering at me like a madman's gibber.

I said, "This New God have a name?"

"Why yes!" squeaked the Mouse Commander. "The Golden People call him Jad Ben Otho."

I felt sick all of a sudden. "Jad Ben Otho."

Dah-ee-lah leaned close, making my head swim with her sudden magic scent, and whispered, "I think maybe you know this New God?"

I inhaled hard, wanting to breathe her in, but only managed to make an ugly snorting sound in my nose. "Yeah," I said, "I think maybe I do."

Behind us, Kenny threw himself back on his blanket, tossing empty dishes and silverware aside with a clatter, and howled with laughter.

I awoke in the middle of the night, desperate to pee, great big boner poking up the front of my shorts, poking up the green army blanket in which I'd wrapped myself to sleep. Not dark here, not quite, gloom of underground night lifted slightly by the dull red embers of mousefire, dark forms sleeping all around, most of them tiny, the forms of sleeping mice.

Felt a thrill of terror. Another thrill of elation.

Magic mice?

Christ.

I sat up slowly, willing myself not to wet my pants. That shadow-hill so close by, that would be Dah-ee-lah. Dah-ee-lah the Untouchable sleeping so close I could reach out and touch her if I wanted. Or maybe if I dared? Right. If I dared.

The other shadow-hill would be Kenny, Kenny so reluctant to become Adar Thu of Cillpa, now that he had the chance, sleeping off by himself. The rest were just mice. Sleeping mice.

Kenny'd been afraid to go into the black tunnel mouth in the side of the hill, tunnel leading down under, deep down under the hills of the City of Gold, Mouse Commander insisting, "This is the way. The only way."

You could see it in Kenny's eyes: The last time we walked into the dark . . .

Then the Untouchable was standing before me, slim and strong, eyes so clear and blue, empty of anything at all like fear. "Onol?"

I'd taken a deep breath, groping for whatever courage I might have, if any, opened my mouth to speak and strangled, suddenly needing to stop myself from reciting a dirty joke the nastier of Kenny's older twin brothers had told me once upon a time, the one that began, "As long as I've got a face . . ."

Instead, I choked out something along the lines of, "Whither thou goest . . ."

That made Kenny laugh, then he was ready to go, too. Maybe it would've been better if I'd let myself tell the dirty joke. Maybe the magic mice would've killed me then, just the way they killed the pirates. Or maybe they all would've laughed.

So we all walked into the tunnel, down into the Pits of the City of Gold, led by the light of tiny torches, led by the sound of marching mousy feet, feet in mousy jackboots, tiny voices squeaking out some eldritch cadence, Heigh-ho, heigh-ho.

Mad as a fucking hatter, I told myself, as the Untouchable led me after the magic mice, down to the earth below, then farther down still. If I'm lucky, I'll wake up in the hospital someday, with a bandaged head and fractured skull, rather than in a straitjacket, in a padded cell.

The faces of my schoolmates danced around me for a moment in the darkness, all of them grinning. We always knew, said the voice of the Assistant Principal, he'd wind up in St. Elizabeth's one day.

Every goofy kid's fear: The straitjacket. The Nuthouse. It's down the booby-hatch for *you*, kiddo!

I got up, navigating by memory, fishing around by the nearest fire until I found one of the tiny torches, lighting it easily from the ruddy embers, holding it high, torch tiny as a Fourth of July sparkler. A couple of mousy eyes glinted back at me, then receded, folding back into their own tiny blankets.

Funny. You'd think the little bastards would know to put out sentries. Maybe they forgot.

It took a little poking around, but I finally found the place I thought might be a bathroom. The Pits of Gold were like some buried, forgotten city, some vast Pentagon-like apartment complex that'd been here in some old Before Time, older than the hills above, on which rested the City of Gold.

The Pits, Dah-ee-lah told us, have been here for five thousand years.

I peed in something that looked more or less like a golden toilet, a golden basin set at knee height anyway, though it held no water, only a dark drain. Then I stood there, looking around the room, lifting my little torch this way and that.

Not a bathroom at all. More like a bed chamber with amenities. Something like a dresser here. A closet there, though it was closed by torn curtains, rather than a door. Hangings on the walls, something like Persian carpets, with scenes of men dressed up in cloaks, feathered head dresses, hunting. . . .

The thing at bay wasn't a stag. A man? No. More like the Hindu god Ganesh, with his elephant's trunk chopped away.

There was a bed, unmade, shiny, silky-looking covers awry, spilled partly over the side, wrapped around. . . .

I took a step back, grimacing at the quick strangle of fear in my guts, eyes shying from another man-shape. Took a deep breath, smelling the smoke of my torch, beyond it, fainter but all pervading, a musty smell, like old mold.

I made myself look. He was lying on his back, one leg tangled in the bedding, the other one doubled under at the knee. There was a long dagger still gripped in one hand, his arm outflung. There were no eyes in the sockets, of course, just black, empty air, but the look on his shriveled yellow face. . . .

Maybe not fear? Maybe something called up by the shrinkage of death? Nonsense. It's terror. Utter terror. Something those lost eyes saw. Something that made him open his mouth to scream.

Then he died.

I could feel cold sweat seeping out on my skin.

Could smell my own stink.

God.

When I turned away, there was a thing like a sink on the wall, not far from the golden toilet. There were faucets, of course, golden faucets, and when I turned one handle, water gurgled from a golden spigot. It was warm on my fingers. Not hot, but not cold like you'd expect of water from the bowels of the earth.

I took off my shirt, wondering if a five thousand-year-old face cloth would still be usable, or if it would disintegrate in a whiff of mummy-dust. I voted for dust, but it was still pliable, and quite clean.

Shows how much I know.

"Onol."

I about jumped out of my skin, spinning, clutching the wet face cloth over my chest.

The Untouchable smiled. "Onol, brave Onol of Aceta, calmly washing up in the death chamber of O-Mai the Cruel. I knew I'd judged you well."

"O-Mai the Cruel . . ." I glanced toward the ancient corpse.

She said, "There he lies."

"Christ," I said. "Next thing you know the Corphals will moan, and we'll do a Keystone Kops number in the nearest doorway." She laughed, though I couldn't imagine any of it meant much to someone from . . . the Land Down Under? Here and now, anyway.

Kenny would know. But Kenny isn't here right now, and I am.

She stepped closer to me, unmindful of the hideous stench rising from my every pore, stepped closer still and reached up to stroke one hand across my cheek. It rasped there, making me shiver.

Then she held up a folded straight razor, leather and gold I thought, or maybe bronze? A folded straight razor. A cake of brown soap. "Let me shave you," she said.

"Shave? Uh. But I don't . . ."

"Of course you do," she whispered. "No hero is ever a beardless boy."

"Hero?" Some TV comedian in my head yammered, *What? Is there a fucking echo in here?*

"Sit down on the stool. Lean your head back into the sink."

I did as I was told, not wondering where the stool had come from, much less. . . As she wet the soap and lathered my face, fingers working in among stout whiskers much like the ones my dad scraped off every morning before work, I made myself whisper, "Who *are* you?"

"Dah-ee-lah," she said.

"No, *really*."

She clicked open the razor, mousy torchlight glinting fearfully on the exposed blade, and said, "The Untouchable."

I stammered, "Are you even *real*?"

"Not yet," she said. "Almost."

Then she straddled my thigh and moved in close, one knee snugging up into my crotch where I was hoping she wouldn't notice my resurrected boner. Or was desperately hoping she'd notice it right *now*.

When she drew the straight razor across my cheek, it was like an electric current surged through me, flashing through my chest, down through my arms and legs, out to my fingers and toes.

"Soon," she said, and, "Soon enough."

Tense and fearful under the scraping of the razor, I told myself, I'm *not* a Lost Boy. Honest to God I'm not. . .

We found Johnny later that day, chained upright to a dungeon wall, deep in the deepest Pits, hanging like a scarecrow, sagging like Christ on the cross.

He looked up when we approached, mousy torches held high, and croaked out, "Alan! Kenny! Oh my God. . ."

I whispered, "Onol and Adar Thu."

Kenny spared a look for me, fear, terror, annoyance written there for anyone to see.

I said, "It's who we *are*. Onol and Adar Thu . . . and Tengam of Alaln."

I think Kenny started to say, "Nuts. . ." but Johnny's cracked voice screamed, "For God's *sake*!"

After we cut him down, breaking the chains with little mousy hammers, heavy hammers for all that they were small, he sat huddled on the floor, shivering, sipping our water, gnawing on a dry crust of mousebread. Looking up, he whispered, "Micky . . ."

"Jad Ben Otho?"

Mingled horror and irritation. "He said they were going to cut out my heart!"

Kenny snickered. "That would be Huitzilopochtli. Maybe he decided Quetzalcoatl would be more impressive than this Jad Ben Otho?"

I said, "I don't think so. Micky isn't all that well read. I don't think he knows *Tarzan the Terrible* was cribbed from 'The Man Who Would Be King.'"

Kenny said, "I read that. The Freemasons of Afghanistan? Stupid idea. The Pashtun would've killed them."

"Yeah."

From the floor, Johnny said, "Let's get out of here. Micky can be Jad Ben Otho or Ketts-a-Kwott or anything else he fucking wants. I'm going home now, one way or another."

I shook my head. "We've got to go up there and get him."

Johnny scrambled to his feet, eyes blazing in the torchlight. "No fucking way!"

Kenny looked at me like he was thinking *nuts* again. "Why?"

I said, "Because he's our *friend*. We can't leave him here."

I could see from the look on the face of Dah-ee-lah the Untouchable it was the right thing to say.

Jump to the inevitable setpiece, high atop the Great Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, in the center of the Plaza of the Gods, at the very heart of the City of Gold, feathered warriors with obsidian-toothed wooden swords all around, the High Priest of the Great God standing stern and proud with his long, wavy-bladed sacrificial dagger, beside him Micky-not-Desta as Jad Ben Otho himself, clothing discarded long ago, for the finery of the Gods: Micky naked, but for an interwoven harness of vines and leaves, laurel wreath woven into his hair.

"I am," he cried, "Jad Ben Otho! I *am* the Great God!"

Kenny snickered, "Jeez, Micky! We all knew you were proud of your dick, from the very first shower in eighth grade gym class, but *gawd*! Lookit you!"

Micky screamed, "I am Jad Ben Otho!" and stamped his foot, effect ruined because it was soundlessly bare.

I said, "Come on, Desta. We gave up that game a long time ago. Time to be the Assistant Mine Inspector of Aceta now."

"I am so Jad Ben Otho!"

The High Priest raised his dagger on high, blood-red jewel in the center of his forehead glinting dangerously. "Bow *down* before the Great God!"

I said, "Who the fuck are you supposed to be? Lu-Don of A-Lur?" I was a little surprised I could remember it that well.

Micky laughed a very familiar nasty little laugh. "Fool! Don't you recognize Matai Shang when you see him?"

Matai Shang? "Micky, you're mixed up . . ."

He lifted his hands then and little crackles of electricity, like slim bolts of real lightning, curled upward, dissipating, leaving behind a burning ozone thunderstorm smell. I felt my hair stir, and thought, This just isn't . . . it just isn't . . .

Micky screamed, "Kill them! *Kill them!*"

I whispered, "Us? You want them to kill *us*, Micky? But we're your *friends*. We've come to save you and . . ."

The warriors, thousands of warriors, all flashing black obsidian and gorgeous tropical feathers, started up the pyramid stairs, chanting something, I don't know what, in some croaky, creaking alien tongue.

Dah-ee-lah the Untouchable, suddenly naked, stepped before them, arms raised, crying out something equally unknown, maybe in that language we imagined was called Canaanite.

Kenny looked at her, astonished, and said, "That's not *right*. That's not how it *goes*." Then he got out his rapier, *en garde* once again.

I took my ten-thousandth deep breath of the adventure.

Micky screamed, "*Kill them! Now!*"

I drew my swords, katana to the right, wakizashi to the left, just as before. All a dream, I told myself. All a dream. They'll hit you over the head again, your nose and ears will bleed, because a dreaming boy with a fractured skull has to account somehow for the headache and . . .

A long, skeletal shadow loomed over me, a fantastically thin shadow made of dancing feathers and long, angular arms, wavy sacrificial dagger sprouting down from one fist, so obviously aimed at me.

I spun, swinging the katana, even remembering I needed to bring up the wakizashi as well, use it as a shield to ward off the dagger. It's just like those Italian duelists you read about, sword in one hand, knife in the other . . .

The katana hit Lu-don/Matai Shang where his left shoulder turned up into his neck, and slid at an angle down through his chest, coming out just under the hair of his right armpit, carrying me with it in a long arc of follow-through.

I staggered hard, struggling to keep my footing, realizing if I tripped I'd go bowling down the steep stairs of the pyramid, and be killed by the fall, even if the warriors of the City of Gold didn't get me first.

The high priest broke in two and fell, one part here, one part there, dead on the stairs and already sliding, sacrificial dagger clattering off to one side, breaking into pieces because it was made of brittle white stone. Bright blood boiled up in the air, splashing high, splashing on me, and I briefly saw his heart, bounding away on its own, like a red rubber ball.

"No!" Micky screamed. "He was supposed to kill *you*! God damn it, Burke, Burke the *Jerk*! You're spoiling everything! Just like you *always* do!" It seemed like he was crying now, face twisted with impotent rage, fists clenched, tears flying from his rage-red face in all directions.

And me? I thought, *Spoiling everything? Just like I always do?*

"It's not fair!" he shouted, "*I'm* supposed to be Onol of Aceta! *I* made him up, not *you*! *I* get the fucking *girl*, not *you*!"

I sat down on the bloody steps, my sword blades clanging on the stone, head spinning, and then, battle raging hopelessly all around me, I leaned forward between my knees and started to puke.

It was dark all of a sudden, copper penny moon sailing high in the empty black sky, casting bronzy shadows here and there, dead trees like el-

dritch magicians posed all around us, motionless, arms on high, frozen in the act of casting one last spell. Dah-ee-lah, naked Dah-ee-lah the Untouchable, was leading me by the hand, up into the hills, away from the City of Gold, leading me away to safety.

Behind us, the City was lit up bloody by firelight, fires whose redness I imagined was fed by real blood, the blood of Lu-don or Matai Shang or whoever he was springing out like an impossible mist when I cut him in two.

Cut him in *two*!

I sat down suddenly, falling onto a mossy hummock, facing toward the city, hilts of my swords poking me in the ribs, staring back downhill through the branches of the dead forest, back to the City of Gold.

The Pyramid of the Great God was the tallest structure of the City, standing out now as a vast black shadow, tall flames leaping from its summit. Silhouetted against the flames were the leaping black shadows of men, cast our way obviously, but looking ever so much like magic mannequins dancing in the heart of a fire.

I said, "I killed that man. I cut him in half with a sword and he . . ."

Dah-ee-lah stood close behind me, hands warm on my shoulders, and I realized that little wisp of tickle on the back of my neck had to be her pubic hair brushing my skin.

It made me shiver.

The fire atop the Pyramid leaped suddenly, yellow, brightening as it grew. And Dah-ee-lah said, "Huitzilopochtli hungers."

Another shiver.

I tried hard to remember what'd happened. The roar of the warriors ascending the stairs. Lu-don's shadow. The swing of the sword. The explosion of blood. Micky screaming, rage, disappointment, bare-naked envy. I remembered puking, then nothing more.

I said, "Kenny? Johnny?"

She said, "Adar Thu of Cillpa and Tengam of Alalan?"

"Yes."

"Lost in the battle," she said.

"Dead?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, God."

She said, "Maybe not."

"You saved me," I said.

"You saved us both."

"I don't remember."

"Then you weren't meant to."

She led me away then, pulling me to my feet, taking me by the hand, leading me farther up in the hills until the City of Gold was no more than ruddy reflections against the night. When we stopped, there was a little stream gurgling somewhere nearby, and a little hollow where we could camp, protected from the cool wind that'd suddenly sprung up.

Just as well, I thought, as Dah-ee-lah lit another magic fire. Bound to get goosebumps dressed like that.

I'd spent a lot of time the last couple of years thinking about naked women, posing them in my mind, making them show me what I wanted

to see, making them do whatever I wanted. I never imagined anything like this.

Before I started hanging around with Micky and Kenny and Johnny, I used to play with a kid named Sandy who lived at the top of our street. Sandy's family seemed different from mine, easier and friendlier, his parents like a couple of overgrown kids themselves, more intent on playing and fun than being adults. They drank, just the way Micky's parents drank, but rather than sitting sullen and red nosed on the porch after supper, they'd howl and chase around until the furniture got tipped over.

Sandy's dad had a workshop in the basement, over by the furnace, and in that dark corner was a wall covered with pictures of naked women, cut from magazines and calendars and such. The women in the pictures stood in stiff poses and leered out at you in a funny way.

And that was all I ever had to go on.

The women in the pictures *were* naked. Naked as a lie. There was nothing real about them, but I didn't know that.

She stood then and turned, turned toward me, a magical goddess outlined by flames. Dah-ee-lah? Nonsense. Dah-ee-lah was just a place marker used out of ignorance in a story written by a boy who knew nothing at all.

Once again, I said, "Who are you really?"

I wasn't expecting an answer, but she said, "I am the magic that turns boy into man, man into beast, beast into angel."

That simple, huh?

The magic itself.

The sublime.

The ridiculous.

All rolled into one.

So I said, "And you? What do *you* get out of it?"

Ah-hah. The oldest question of all.

She laughed then, and said, "I get that magic moment when the Untouchable becomes the Beloved."

Then she sat down on my knees, facing me, slid ever so close, and kissed me that first real kiss, the one all of us remember so well, that first electric touch.

I stood alone, peeing on the base of a dead tree, in the wan gray light just before sunup in the Land Down Under, magic moon having set a few minutes earlier in a now-familiar flash of momentary darkness. I'd walked up here when I awoke, carefully disentangling from the sleeping form of Dah-ee-lah the Beloved, Untouchable no more, looking down at her, still astonished, before wandering away, wondering why I still needed privacy for this.

Because I'm still me?

Surprise, surprise, surprise.

And yet.

The night was no more than a kaleidoscope of shifting images, presenting themselves one by one for my amazed inspection.

How would I feel now, if this had happened in the real world, mundane

world, the world of my dull old life? More amazed, because of the juxtaposition? Or less amazed, because of the things that would've had to come before it?

I couldn't imagine Dah-ee-lah as one of the eighth-grade girls I'd known, aged another year or two, and ready for this.

But that *has* to be what happens, right?

There was a soft rustle off among the trees, as the light continued to brighten and I continued to pee, then Kenny's voice said, "I got away."

It made my belly muscles clench, made me stop peeing abruptly. When I turned to look, he was standing not far away in the lessening gloom, rapier sprouting from his hand, old leather football helmet strapped to his head. There was a big cut in the helmet, leather split to show cotton batting inside. Kenny had a black eye, and a crust of blood blackening one nostril. There was a big bruise on his thigh, too.

"I figured you were dead."

He nodded. "Me too. I tried to keep up with you," he said, "but you fought like a madman, protecting her, getting her away." He looked me up and down. "What happened to your clothes?"

I gestured toward the hollow, and said, "I took them off." I tried hard to remember what he was describing, *me*, fighting like a *madman*, but I couldn't.

He stepped that way, craning to see over the rise, evidently seeing enough. "You did it with her, didn't you?"

I looked away and nodded, not wanting to see if he was jealous or not.

After a moment, I heard him whisper, "Fuck. . ."

Wanting to lighten things up a bit, I laughed softly, and said, "Well, that would be the word you're looking for, all right."

When I looked at him again, he seemed angry, scowling. "These things can't be happening to us. We're *thirteen*! Little kids. . . ." Perhaps unsaid: You can't have sex with beautiful girls, can't *kill* men, cut them in two with a sword. . . .

"Kenny, what is it they make you say at Bar Mitzvah?"

He looked away, mouth twisting. "You were there."

I was, and he'd said the line in English, not just in Hebrew. *Today* . . . Hell, it takes more than years to make a man, and more than just a woman, for that matter. But, even now, *especially* now, I don't know exactly what it is that does make a man. I said, "Kenny, look at me. Do I look like a little kid to you?"

He looked, looked me up and down, eyes trying to shy away, failing, looking at me after all, just as the sun peeped over the white cliffs, filling the Land Down Under with golden light. "No . . ." he said. "No. I guess not. You're taller. Thinner and harder looking than you were. And your . . ." he gestured at my crotch, then looked at my face with a smirk. "Jesus, Alan. I *tried* not to look at guys in the gym-class shower, you know."

I laughed. "Me too."

American schools have an age-span problem that causes unintended consequences. You're supposed to start first grade when you're six years old, but some parents wait until the kid is seven. Then again, if you turn six by the end of the calendar year, they'll let you in when you're five. Me,

Kenny, and Micky were all born late in the year, so only Johnny was fourteen already. Meanwhile, some kids will flunk a year, or even two. So there were boys in that eighth-grade gym class who were already fifteen years old, and looked like they were ready to play for the NFL.

He said, "You still think this is all real?"

I shrugged. "If it is, we've been carried away by the magic. Can you imagine going back now? Waking up and going to school in the fall?"

He shook his head. "So what do we do?"

I gestured toward the crest of the hill. "Go see if Dah-ee-lah is awake, I guess."

"And then?" You could see him wondering what he'd see, when she got out of the green blanket she'd conjured from nowhere at all, the one we'd slept in when what we were doing was over.

I said, "We've got to see about Johnny. And Micky."

That made a shadow go behind his eyes, but he sighed, and said, "I was afraid of that. But . . . right."

That day Dah-ee-lah the Beloved led us down out of the hills and back to the sea. We'll do what needs to be done, she'd said, when the time comes to do it. I thought to object, to insist we *had* to go, but . . . no way for me to make sense of it, much less insist. It's her world, Kenny said. You need to *listen*.

So she led me downward, away from the City of Gold, all through that long, golden day. The landscape changed from dead forest to hilly meadow, all green grass, buttercups and white clover, drifts of butterflies, orange, gold, blue, black, scattering before us.

On the beach, we ate our magic supper, while the sun drifted down toward the white cliffs, dimming the way it did, preparing, I suppose, to become the moon, while the blue of the sky deepened. If I looked, I could see the little black hole that led back into the caves, to where we'd found the Chamber of the Dead, back into the tunnels under the mine, back to Dinky's Cliffs and Marumscow Village and the world we'd left behind.

What happens, I wondered, if we scale those cliffs and go back into the darkness?

I saw Kenny looking too, wondering as well, I'm quite sure. Kenny with a home to go to and no Beloved to hold him here.

When he looked at me, I saw it didn't matter. "Funny," he said. "It's like we never lived there at all."

After dinner, we threw off our clothes and swam naked in the sparkling sea, laughing, playing, not like children, merely like ourselves. We'd fallen into this world in a way I couldn't fathom. Even in a dream, you somehow know it's not real. Things happen that can't happen. There's an air of flatness in a dream, of a world that can be peeled away in an instant. Here and now, the water felt just the way it does when you go to the beach. Only there'd never been such a beach as this, nor ever such a sea.

Afterward, as our featureless metal moon rose in that same starless sky, we made our beds around the fire, Dah-ee-lah and I together, Kenny off on the other side. Giving us privacy, I suppose, for whatever we wanted to do.

In the morning, we swam again in water just cool enough to be refresh-

ing, then put on our clothes and ate a magic breakfast over another magic fire. There was a little mist hanging over the sea, pale and translucent in air grown still for the first time since we'd come here. Suddenly, I missed the soft hiss of the wind in the grass, the rustling in the trees like background music in a movie. This new silence seemed ominous. Or worse.

They came out of the mist as if by prearranged signal, just as breakfast dishes and warm green blankets were folded away to nothing at all, three low ships rowing in toward the beach, sails furled, so their masts looked like the crosses of Golgotha, oars lifting and dipping gently in the soft blue water.

Funny ships they were, right out of an old book, prows aiming the wrong way, curving forward to cut through the water, big black-and-red eyes painted on either side. Seen head on they looked like three demons about to rise from the waves.

All knowing, as always, Kenny murmured, "*PentekonTERS*."

I said, "Those are Phoenician ships, aren't they?"

"I think so."

Who else went to sea in ships like these? Agamemnon, Odysseus, Hector . . . a thousand black ships, headed for Troy.

Dah-ee-lah shouted, once again in that guttural speech we called Canaanite, and a man waved back, from near the bow of the foremost ship. The ships ground into the beach, prows ripping the sand, oars lifting, suddenly vertical, then lowered to the deck and were gone. Where the oars had been, a hundred men stood up in each ship, all of them burned red-brown in the sun, all of them with dense black beards, curly hair shining, as if slick with oil.

I found myself swallowing hard, and thought, I really *do* need to learn to use these damned swords. What was it Kenny said I did? Something about fighting like a madman? Maybe the madness will come again.

The man who'd waved jumped down into the sea and waded ashore, running to Dah-ee-lah, calling out something in Canaanite or Phoenician or whatever, swept her up in a tight embrace, and I felt my first hard pang of jealousy, felt my hand drift to the sharkskin hilt of the katana. He was tall and tan and muscular, I saw, dressed in a little white skirt like you sometimes see girls wear on *American Bandstand*, something like a leather safety-patrol belt going diagonal across his chest. I remembered that was called a Sam Browne belt, and realized he looked an awful lot like the illustration of John Carter on the cover of the Ballantine edition of *A Princess of Mars*.

I heard Kenny say, "Christ. Now what?" There was another man jumping down now, a man just like the first, running up the beach and grabbing her up, as soon as the first one let her go, smothering her in a hug, kissing her right on the lips. I suddenly felt like I would never be able to breath again. I wanted to kill them both, right now, slicing them to bits with katana and wakizashi, but there were other men getting off the ships now. And every one of them seemed to have a short spear in his hand.

Yep, I'll teach them not to lay hands on *my* Beloved . . .

When they let her go, she turned to me, saw my face, and laughed. I think that made me blush, because she laughed again, and so did one of

the men. The other one seemed more interested in the fact I had a grip on my long sword, though I hadn't made a move to draw it.

"Dah-ee-lah . . ." I said.

The first man looked at her, amused. "New name, Ishtar?"

Behind me, I heard Kenny snort hard and strangle, forcing himself not to bray out a horse laugh. I'm sure Kenny knows a lot more about Ishtar than me, and what I know is bad enough, if even a little of what was in that James Michener book was ever true.

She stepped forward and reached for me with both hands, making me take my hand off the katana so I could hold them in mine, and then she said, "Old friends, from another time, another place, here to help us now."

I thought to ask her about being Ishtar, about how that works when your name is Untouchable, but . . . stupid. What's true *now* is all that's true. What was true in some other universe doesn't matter. Maybe she *was* Ishtar, somewhere, some when. And maybe somewhere, some when, I was still a little boy.

She turned to the men, and said, "This is my old friend Hanno Baal, and his brother Hanno Melqart."

I said, "Pleased to meet you. I was almost expecting Phraa." Nothing from anyone. I guess I'm the only one here ever heard of Edwin Arnold. "Are you from Carthage?" Seemed reasonable, maybe those names sounding a bit like Hannibal and Hamilcar, but still only blank looks.

Kenny said, "Qart Hadasht?"

Hanno Baal, with an intensely thick accent, said, "Lots of places called New City around the Great Green, boy. Especially out west."

I said, "Maybe it was after their time."

Dah-ee-lah the Beloved stood beside me then, putting her arm around the back of my waist and hooking her thumb under my sword belt, then addressed the two of them, a long sentence in Canaanite.

I glanced at Kenny, who said, "I think she just told them we need a thousand ships."

I saw it in my head, right then and there: The Wine Dark Sea, stretching out to the far horizon of the Land Down Under, a thousand black ships rowing ashore by rank and file, long white wakes streaming out behind them, all watched from the City of Gold by Jad Ben Otho, poor Micky standing on the wall with . . . who? I don't know. Not Matai Shang.

I'd already cut *him* in two.

Jump-cut now to the inevitable climax, though it wasn't about *this*, after all. The City of Gold is invaded and broken, walls thrown down, Aztec warriors defeated so easily by Phoenician marines, obsidian and wood smashed so easily by hard swords of cold black iron, curls of smoke rising now from what little in the city would burn.

In a real world, I knew, with arrows against arrows and spears against spears, it wouldn't have been so easy. It doesn't matter, in a *real* world, whether those points are of metal or stone, but . . .

In *this* world, Onol of Aceta fought his way up the granite stairs of the Great Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, some impossible whirling Dervish, swords flashing, slashing out to right and left, katana and wakizashi

splitting feather-clad men like so many colorful, helpless papier mâché toys.

Beside him, Adar Thu of Cillpa pranced like a dancer, bright steel blade flickering in the sun, making little flowers of blood that brought men down.

Nothing, I thought. No one and nothing. Shadow puppets on a stage, here for just a moment, then gone again, as though they never were.

When we got to the summit, Dah-ee-lah, naked Dah-ee-lah, Untouchable, Beloved, Ishtar, Goddess, stood facing downward, arms outstretched, commanding silence. The war stopped. The fires went out. The killing ended. Silence fell. Maybe the dead rose up like children in a game, ready to play some other day.

I don't know.

Maybe no one knows.

Micky stood, naked but for his wreathing of holy vines, behind an altar on which Johnny lay bound, face up, waiting. Micky stood over him, holding a wavy white sacrificial blade, perhaps the City's spare for the one that broke when Lu-don/Matai Shang died.

"Tengam." I said. "Tengam of Alahn."

Johnny's big blue eyes looked at me, mute, insensate.

"John?"

He smiled, "What the hell *took* you so long? I thought he was really going to kill me!"

Micky took the wavy blade in both hands and lifted it over his head, aimed straight down at Johnny's heart. "I still can, you know."

"Can you?"

I saw the doubt, of course.

He whispered, "It's not *real*, you see. I could do it and he'd come to no harm, because it's not real. It only *seems* real, and seeming is not being. Not the same thing at all."

I took a step forward and pointed my katana right at his throat.

He got that stubborn look I knew so well, the one that comes when he's about to lose an argument he wants to win.

So I poked him with the sword, making just a little cut above the vee in the middle of his collarbone. He blinked, blinked hard, took a step back, gagging, and lowered the knife. Then he put a hand up and touched the little cut, looking down, astonished, at bloody fingers.

I said, "Okay. You win. Seeming isn't being, Micky. Um. Do you mind if I cut off your head now?"

His eyes got big, and his skin turned green.

In the Land Down Under, a Golden Road leads from the Great Pyramid of Huitzilopochtli, straight to the Door into Summer. As it happens, the Road *is* made of bricks, but that doesn't matter either. The Door calls to you, just like the Pied Piper's flute, and, willy-nilly, there you go.

They followed us out through the City of Gold, these feathered savages we'd saved and made free, flanked on either side by marching arrays of Phoenician marines, Hanno Baal calling cadence like some Eternal Drill Instructor, Magic Mice squeaking away beyond them, one, two, three, four . . .

I wanted it to be ever so real, I did, but the silly voice in my head wanted me to be singing the theme song from *Sargeant Bilko* instead, calling me back from the Edge of Forever, as usual.

In the end, what started as a swell of savage voices, chanting the religious rites of Tyre and Tenochtitlan, became the high, sweet singing of a million Munchkins, then faded slowly, as they dropped away by ones and twos, by groups and gangs, until all were gone and the five of us walked on alone to a huge, ominous door set in the base of the White Cliffs themselves.

It was a big door, big enough for Jack's Giant to walk on through, foing and fumming for all he was worth.

I looked at the others, at Micky and Kenny standing together, Johnny off to one side, saving my last look for Dah-ee-lah, Beloved, whoever she was. Then I turned, grabbed the Brass Ring, and pulled hard.

The Door swung open on silent, oiled hinges, and Micky tittered inanely. "Sorry," he whispered. "I was expecting it to squeak." There were steps inside, white stone steps, looking much like the concrete steps to my family's basement on Staggs Court, steps disappearing upward into silent, dusty nothing.

I stepped inside and peered into the darkness.

Johnny said, "Alan, where do these steps go?"

Above us, in the real world, could only be Marumsc Village. Here?

Dah-ee-lah said, "They lead you home."

I looked at the others. "Tengam? Adar Thu? Desta?"

Johnny said, "My name's John, just like my dad."

Micky looked away, face reddening, and I knew he still wanted to be Onol, to be the Leader, the man who made all the decisions and made them right, but then he sighed and reached up, rubbing his neck just above the collarbone, where the cut had been, but was no more, and said, "Okay. Let's go."

I looked at Dah-ee-lah again, trying hard to think of just the right thing to say. Nothing. All I could do was hold out my hand, maybe give her a pleading look.

She said, "Did you think my home was here?" Honest to God, I wanted her to say *whither thou goest* back to me, right then and there, but all she did was smile and take my hand, and there was nothing left to do but turn and go up the stairs.

Johnny came last, and closed the door behind us, then there was nothing but darkness. Darkness, footfalls, breathing, walking upwards, until my legs ached and I began to wonder if maybe we should stop for a little rest. Maybe . . . *thump*.

I said, "Ow!"

Kenny said, "I *told* you we should've brought the helmets."

Micky said, "But we lost the carbide."

Johnny said nothing. Dah-ee-lah started laughing.

Overhead was a slanting wooden door, in two parts, one of those bunker doors you see in old movies, leading to tornado cellars, like in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"Shut up," I said, "Lemme see if I can . . ."

This door did squeak as I pushed it open, grunting with effort, door falling aside with a bang, opening on a world of soft light. I got up onto level ground, leading Dah-ee-lah by the hand to stand beside me. Overhead, the pale blue sky seemed impossibly far away, and there was a tiny, heatless white sun low on the horizon.

Coming up beside me, Kenny whistled, looking around. Whistled, and said, "Flat as Kansas, all right, but . . . something's wrong. It's . . ."

Up next, Micky took one look and snorted. "The horizon's at least twice as far away as it should be." He looked at me, face almost angry, and said, "You know where this is, don't you?"

I scanned along the far horizon until I found it, a small pimple like a faraway mountain. On it, I could see the glint of glass, the white walls of buildings, the red light of fires. "Aceta," I said. "The City on the Mountain."

All right, then. No parking problems. No traffic lights. No freeway complexes that look like diagrams for abdominal surgery. But when Micky and I made this place up, we didn't forget about flies and mosquitoes, not to mention things that would eat your silly-ass dragons for lunch.

Kenny said, "Where's Johnny?" He was looking down the hole in the ground, down into the darkness.

Very quietly, Dah-ee-lah said, "He went home."

I said, "What do you mean, *home*?"

"Home where he belonged."

"Marumsco Village?" Home to Mom and Dad, brother and sister, ninth grade in the Fall? Home to high school and college? Home to that driver's license, that first car, that first date, going steady, getting married, getting jobs, making babies, growing old? Home to all those years, and that achingly familiar life we were all told to expect, to want, to work so hard for?

Home to 1964?

She said, "The Door into Summer takes you to the summer you deserve."

I said, "And for the rest of us, that summer, that *home* . . ." I gestured around, raising my arm toward far Aceta, glittering like quicksilver on its mountain.

Micky said, "It's still not fair, you know."

I said, "Nothing ever is."

Dah-ee-lah laughed suddenly, sound flat and echoless across the empty plain. "Oh, you're so wrong, both of you. Maybe we're not the Sector Maidens you silly-ass boys dream about, but there's one of us for every one of you who will open his heart, not just to some woman or another, but to the great world all around you. The man who can't do that is a Lost Boy indeed." Then she took me by the hand and we walked on through fabled sunshine, all the way to the City on the Mountain, and beyond.

In time, every one of us found some way to live happily ever after, even Micky, though he never got to be the Great God, nor even the Chief Mine Inspector of Aceta.

And, to my amazement, there were dragons that needed killing after all. ○

REMEMBERING THE FUTURE

We remember the future,
the bright, curving horizons gleaming
on viewscreens against a backdrop of stars,
space-armored legions clanking
past rows of hulking machines
like enormous vacuum tubes
to confront the all-metal worlds:
planets armed and powered
as only planets can be,
and dropped out of hyperspace
like so many ping-pong balls.
We know that mankind will triumph
in the end, even as we know
that Mars with its blown-glass cities
and Venus with swamps and dinosaurs
are out there, waiting.
We are, after all, the race
that will rule the Sevagram,
whatever that is.

But time passes.
The future fades.
We look back on it fondly,
yet with little conviction.
How very selfish to think
it was ever ours alone.
No, once you and I
have long since been absorbed
into the Cosmic Overmind,
or are just specks of dust
in a Lensman's wake,
the future will remain.
Let us remember it fondly, then,
in great detail,
and pass it on,
like the treasure that it is,
to our children.

—Darrell Schweitzer



THE BIG KAHUNA

RESOLUTION

by John Meaney

Pyr, \$25.00

ISBN: 1591024374

PANDORA'S STAR

by Peter F. Hamilton

Del Rey, \$7.99

ISBN: 0345479211

JUDAS UNCHAINED

by Peter F. Hamilton

Del Rey, \$26.95

ISBN: 0345461665

RIVER OF GODS

by Ian McDonald

Pyr, \$25.00

ISBN: 1591024366

Ever since I began writing these columns, good Lord, over two decades ago, I have been railing against trilogies, or even worse, open-ended novel series, on literary grounds. I've now got to admit that it's become a lost cause. Not on literary grounds, as we will get into later at great length, if not as great length as the material to be covered, but for reason of bottom-line commercial diktat.

As previously noted with no little outrage in these pages, the powers that be in the publishing business, namely the major book store chains, have now decreed that, except for exceptional exceptions, no hardcover novel with a cover price of over twenty-five dollars shall grace their racks. Meaning, calculating backward as the publishers have been forced to

do, that no novel whose unit cost cannot put it in the black at that cover price shall be published, no matter its literary merit. Meaning that except for those exceptional exceptions, they won't, or rather can't, publish a novel longer than about one hundred and fifty thousand words, or so at least they claim.

The exceptional exceptions are almost all for behemoths written by authors whose previous BookScan numbers come up best-sellers. The chains will order novels by best-selling authors in best-selling amounts, meaning that publishers can order large first printings, meaning that the unit cost to produce each copy goes down proportionally, meaning that given a large enough printing they can put that twenty-five dollar cover price on an otherwise outsized novel and make a profit.

Otherwise forget it.

Well, maybe not quite. We will be considering three novels that seem to have somehow gotten around this rule. *River of Gods* by Ian McDonald runs about six hundred pages but sells for twenty-five dollars and is a literary masterpiece. *Pandora's Star* by Peter F. Hamilton, which I've read in a \$7.98 paperback (which seems to be the paperback magic number equivalent of the hardcover twenty-five dollars) and runs 988 pages, is one of the most exasperating novels that I have ever read. Its hardcover sequel *Judas Unchained*, which tweaks the edge of the pricing envelope at \$26.95, runs 827 pages. I doubt I will ever manfully attempt

to read it, even though *Pandora's Star* is masterfully written.

We will get to these exceptions to the commercial rule of exceptional exceptions later. But literarily speaking and generally speaking, writers who have stories to tell that need more than one hundred fifty thousand words to tell properly in literary terms have a big problem. They are strongly constrained to do it as at least a trilogy, since a "duology" is as awkward a form to get published as two books as thirty-five thousand words is to get published as a novella in a magazine.

This not only presents the writer with a literary problem, it produces a paradox that is inherently impossible to resolve fully. To wit, do you presume that the only readership for books two and three are people who have already read book one—and worse, that the only readership for book three is those who have read the first two volumes? Or do you attempt to make each book a novel that anyone can pick up and read cold?

An excellent example is the *Nulapeiron Sequence* by John Meaney. This consists of *Paradox* and *Context*, which I have already reviewed in these pages, and now the appropriately titled *Resolution*, after months of the usual coitus interruptus.

I've never done this before, but now I find myself constrained to quote from a previous review, with merciful ellipses, since as a critic I find myself on the horns of the same dilemma as the writer, unable to move forward without as it were somehow summarizing the back story. And so resorting to this now seems both ironically appropriate and exemplary.

... *Paradox* and *Context* ...

[are] exemplary of what I'm talking about here. ... Nulapeiron is a large planet out there

somewhere colonized by humans centuries ago. It would seem to have a toxic (to humans) atmosphere, for the humans inhabit not the surface but vast and deep interconnected caves, caverns, corridors, and warrens whose breathable atmosphere must be provided by a fungus genetically engineered to do so.

Humans have also been on Nulapeiron long enough to have evolved, or devolved, an elaborate and elaborately stifling neo-feudal culture. The planet is divided up into "domains," feudal fiefs, each fief consists of multiple levels of stratified caverns, and the physical stratification mirrors and determines a rigid class structure. Only a Brit could or would create a dystopian class system like this.

The protagonist of the series is one Tom Corcorigan, who starts at the near bottom of his fief's levels and class structure, rises slowly and stepwise to the top as "Lord Corcorigan," becomes a secret rebel against the system, then a not-so-secret rebel leader, then a fugitive, rises again, falls, flees, rises once more. ...

There is a great deal of what at first may seem like cavalier space opera pseudo-science—prescient seers, living vehicles of every sort, creatures seemingly concocted at the author's whim, and so forth—but Meaney does make a serious attempt at giving it all at least science fictional credibility. Genetic engineering seems to be the dominant technology—why engineer transportation vehicles, atmosphere generating systems, and so forth, when you can breed them?—and since Nulapeiron could not have been col-

onized without the genetically engineered fungus, this cultural technological dominance is credible. There is also a plausibly worked out futuristic mutation of the web and the internet and other hardware, as opposed to meatware, technologies, so in toto the technosphere of the planet is quite three-dimensionally credible.

There is also a lot of very advanced futuristic physics underpinning the science, technology, prescience, and even the plot, underpinned in turn by mathematics too recondite for me to quite tell where the real cutting edge stuff grades into the necessary vaporware and bullshit, which, after all, is exactly where what I have elsewhere called "rubber science" is supposed to leave the reader within a piece of true science fiction, "post-modern" or otherwise.

Further, early on in the first novel, young Tom comes into possession of an artifact that tells him tales from his deep past, which is to say our own relatively near future, which Meaney uses to intercut another story, namely that of how the far future set-up of Nulapeiron came to be, the two timelines seeming to slowly converge so that, I suspect, they will finally come together in *Resolution*.

Tom is given the thing by what Nulapeiron folk assume is a mythical creature, a Pilot; one of the humans cyborged to the FTL ships that colonized the planet long ago before some mysterious event somehow rendered such space travel impossible and Pilots supposedly extinct.

And the story that Meaney intercuts with the main narrative, at least in the first two novels, is that of the events that caused such isolation, the physics and metaphysics behind it, told from the points of view of two generations of Pilots, mother and daughter, and, in contradistinction to the doings on far-future Nulapeiron, with science rather less rubbery, and in a time and in places at least initially not that distant from our own.

Thus Meaney is attempting, and as far as I have read thus far succeeding, in doing what space opera by any meaningful definition never attempts. He seeks, at least in terms of literary effect, to seamlessly connect the reality of his far future with that of the readers. . . .

Further, and this is something space opera can do but seldom does—at least as presented in the first two novels—Tom Corcorigan is a flawed hero.

One arm has been chopped off as punishment by the powers that be, making him a physically flawed hero, which is rendered more psychologically and practically significant because a central part of his heroic powers is that he is a crackerjack martial artist despite, or possibly because of, this, and martial art combat of any number of schools forms a large part of Meaney's action, a bit too much for my taste, becoming obsessional not only on the part of his character but on the part of the author.

More importantly, Tom is a *psychologically* flawed hero. In the white heat of combat he does kill without hesitation and under extremes of torture de-

generates into a subhuman killing machine, but he is agonized by his own acts and mistakes, rather than being a simple good-guy with an authorial license to consciencelessly kill, to the point where he spends quite a bit of time as a drunken derelict.

Thus what we . . . have here is two novels of a three novel sequence that attempts to be both literarily and thematically quite sophisticated and mimetic, unlike space opera, without being anything more or less than science fiction period, and for my money succeeds.

Whew! Okay, that's done, and I've gotten the back story out of the way with one big awkward expository lump. Which, with your kind indulgence, maybe I can get away with as a critic reviewing the concluding novel, *Resolution*, but which the writer of that novel, or any other third volume of a trilogy, can never expect to get away with.

When my novel *The Children of Hamlin* was published in thirty-two installments in a weekly newspaper, I had no choice—the only thing for it was to write thirty-one capsule summaries of what had gone before. Nor could I simply add on each week, which would have made the summary longer than the installment about fifteen weeks in. I had to cut and compress to keep them the same length thirty fucking times, the most nightmarish writing task I have ever faced.

It would be a lot easier to throw up one's hands and do likewise for a mere two installments of a trilogy—a merciful favor for those who have read the first two novels months or even years ago, but something of an

outrage to a reader of the third who hasn't.

As far as I know, no author of a trilogy has taken this way out, and Meaney doesn't either. He does as good and clever a job of bringing the reader who missed the first two up to date without turning off the reader who hasn't as perhaps can be done. But those readers still find themselves plowing through a certain amount of back story insertions, well done and artfully disguised to be sure, but still inevitably annoying, still slowing the novel down and making that reader wish he would get on with the current thread of the story.

And speaking of getting on with the thread of the story, perhaps in part because of the need for all the back story insertions, but also probably because it is time-honored practice, Meaney falls into a narrative strategy which, though admittedly common, is one that *really* annoys me as a reader, and one which I therefore try my best to avoid when writing fiction myself.

When narrating a story via multiple viewpoint characters, one must choose where to change viewpoints; the more viewpoints you have, the more changes you must make, and here, where you have two time-lines as well, it has to be done even more often.

Personally, and I admit this is a matter of taste, I try to end each viewpoint section with some sort of minor climax or epiphany or even just bon mot dialog to leave the reader a little satisfied before the next viewpoint shift. But all too often, writers do exactly the opposite, as Meaney does far too many times here; ending viewpoint sections with cliff-hangers to keep the reader in suspense. Okay, this works in terms

of building narrative tension, but by my lights it's a cheap trick, something like a teasing lover bringing the partner to the point of orgasm but then drawing back, over and over again. It builds tension all right, and to a point this can be pleasurable, but tension by its very nature hovers on the brink of annoyance, and when the clever reader or lover sees through the technique, it goes over the edge.

For me at least, this technique also weakens the long series of battle sequences that are told in *Resolution* from multiple viewpoints in just this manner. Without experiencing the tactical climaxes at the end of their build-ups, I at least, found myself plowing through the battles and skirmishes not really enjoying them for their own sake, but primarily to finally get to the, uh, resolution, at the end.

Still, it takes a certain courage to call the final novel of a trilogy *Resolution*. Aside from this most technical of cavils, structurally at least Meaney covers his bet and delivers, bringing the two intercut timelines—that of Tom Corcorigan's story on Nulapeiron and that of the Pilots' a millennium earlier via his access to the device that tells that story to him and to the reader—closer and closer together until they finally converge at the plot climax and thematic and characterological closure of the whole Nulapeiron sequence at the very end of *Resolution*.

Bravo for that! It is no easy task to hold a real novelistic structure together at all over a three-novel sequence, and to end each of the first two books with secondary endings that at least don't leave the reader hanging in mid-air prior to throwing the book across the room—as Hamilton does in *Pandora's Star*, which we

will get to later. Meaney really understands novelistic structure, and it would be very interesting to see what he could do in a free-standing novel, even a huge one like *River of Gods*.

He even pulls it off thematically, if in a forced, perfunctory manner. Tom, risen from the lumpenproletariat to Lordship, and more than once, has his moral struggle with the rigid and unjust class system, detailed and both loathed and sucked up to as only a British writer could so ambiguously render, finally reluctantly, or so we are meant to believe, achieving the pinnacle even beyond kingship as "Warlord" of the entire planet; obeyed, saluted, honored, and all but worshipped in a manner that would have der Fuhrer creaming in his tight black leather jeans. At which point, he uses his dictatorial power to destroy the class system which gave it to him in the first place.

Bravo to that too! Frank Herbert once promised me that he would do just that at the end of the *Dune* sequence, but the series went on and on, taken over by lesser writers when he died, and he never lived to do it. Nor has anyone else but Meaney done it with this sort of pseudo-medievalist and currently all-too-British sort of thing. Power to the People! Power to those who would surrender the Divine Right of the Emperor of Everything to the People and thus become the ultimate true hero thereof.

However, Meaney does it on the last two pages. You know that it's coming, and that's part of the problem; there's no sense of real struggle within Tom, though this scenario has been well built up over three novels, and it could have been the true and most resonant thematic resolution of the whole sequence, a

characterological resolution, a political resolution, a mighty aesthetic resolution.

Also, it occurs after the plot climax, which is a sort of victory over the Dark Force of the Anomaly, which comes after an entirely overlong war story—which is really no story at all, but a series of battle sequences ending with a *deus ex machina* victory thanks to the Pilots, who appear from more or less literally nowhere with a great fleet to save the day.

There is a sense of battle fatigue about this novel. Meaney writes well here, as he has in the first two books. He preserves and resolves the structure of the whole thing, but the science fictional technological, metaphysical, and mathematical extrapolation that worked so well in the first two novels has a tendency to descend into space opera blah-blah-blah here, ending perilously close to “they built a blaster out of bailing wire and chewing gum” at the end.

Then, too, the “love story” between Tom and his fellow-warrior wife is groaningly unconvincing and unfelt, as if Meaney decided he had to insert this sort of thing pro-forma to satisfy pop fic convention.

One wonders what Meaney would have written if he had been free to write the whole thing as one grand free-standing novel. I suspect that the book would have been shorter by a quarter or even a third, shorn of the need to fill in back story twice, shorn perhaps even of the endless sequences of martial arts practice in the first two books, and with the greatly overlong sequences of battles that end the sequence compressed into no more than what's really required to tell the story.

Then too—and this is only writerly supposition, having written more than one free-standing novel at cur-

rent enforced trilogy length myself—perhaps if Meaney had written this whole “sequence” as a single novel, the flow might have carried him through with the same energy as the first two novels, which seems somewhat attenuated in *Resolution*, as if the writer had manfully pressed on as promised without quite the same passion.

Peter F. Hamilton's *Pandora's Star* tips the scales at 988 pages in paperback, and the last page printed ends with an announcement that “The Commonwealth Saga will be continued [not concluded?] in *Judas Rising*.”

The former sells for the current paperback standard price of \$7.99, and the latter is an 827 page hardcover priced at a tad over the standard at \$26.95; meaning, one must suppose, that the publisher expects big sales figures or has been guaranteed big chain buys, in order to bring the unit cost down below the profit point.

Moreover, this is not fantasy, which has a proven track record of being able to hit best-seller numbers at the high end, but straightforward science fiction of a very traditional kind, which does not. Ordinarily I would quail at starting to read a “duology” or “sequence” of almost two thousand pages—enough for a tetralogy at the very least, and god knows how long to reach the conclusion, if ever, if there turns out to be more beyond *Judas Rising*. But my curiosity was piqued to the point of leafing through *Pandora's Star*, and I found myself hooked.

Why?

I certainly didn't intend to be. The publisher sent the paperback of *Pandora's Star* with hardcover galleys for *Judas Rising*. The blurbs and marketing material made it all too clear that no sense could likely be made of the latter without first read-

ing the former, meaning a commitment to reading 1815 pages to be able to review the more current *Judas Rising* in any coherent fashion. This is the sort of thing I usually avoid like the plague—wouldn't you?

However, the publisher in question, Del Rey, has more or less publicly admitted that they, like most of the other "SF lines," have been publishing very little actual science fiction like this, let alone an 827 page \$26.95 hardcover of same—near what the chains will accept price-wise, but at that length and price, meaning a unit cost that would require a large printing to make any economic sense.

On the one hand, as a novelist, this piqued my curiosity. On the other, as a critic who has bemoaned the de-emphasis of true science fiction in the "SF genre lines," I felt a certain moral obligation not to toss aside these books without at least perusing *Pandora's Star*.

So I did, which was enough to reveal Hamilton as a fully rounded, extremely accomplished out-and-out science fiction writer completely committed to the real deal.

The novel starts with a ten page Prologue. In the near future, NASA astronaut Wilson Kime is making the first landing on Mars. This is written with a hard technological realism but also a psychological connection between the astronaut and what he is doing, reminiscent of Ben Bova at his very best.

Kime makes the first Mars landing on p. 7, or thinks he has, but on p. 9, it turns out that two geeks have invented a wormhole generator more or less in their garage and gotten there first. End of Prologue.

Chapter One then begins: "The star vanished from the center of the telescope's image in less time than a single human heartbeat."

And we are immediately zapped into what is going to be the mystery McGuffin of *Pandora's Star*, and centuries into the future that the wormhole generation technology has made. The astronomer who is looking through the telescope is doing so on a more or less backwater planet in another solar system, in the so-called "Commonwealth," an interstellar human civilization of something like three hundred planets and still growing.

A few alien species have been encountered, but not many, and all of them are uniquely strange. People have indefinite lifespans, since their memory recordings are updated regularly, there are multiple back-ups, and they can be dumped into clones. They have "e-butlers" which act like implanted highly sophisticated PDAs-cum-mobile phones.

Interstellar travel and commerce is accomplished by railway trains. Yes, *trains*. The wormhole gates are set up in vast train stations. You ride a train from wherever you are on the planet of origin to the nearest interstellar railway station. Maybe you have to change trains, maybe not. In either case you take a train through the appropriate wormhole gate, and instantly the train is on the destination planet, where you may or may not have to change to a local.

This may seem like a silly species of steampunk technology and Hamilton like some kind of railroad fanatic having a personal high old time at the expense of credibility, but it isn't. Not only does Hamilton describe this in masterful detail, but he convinces you that it makes sense. Why travel by "spaceship" when you can take a local metro line to a big terminal station, switch trains, pop through a wormhole to another station on another planet, maybe take

another local directly to your destination thereon? It's like taking the Metro in Paris to the Gare du Nord, changing to the Eurostar through the Channel Tunnel to Victoria Station and catching the Tube to wherever you want to end up in London, only more or less instantaneously. Hamilton is British; this is a very European concept in practice, and believe me it's better than screwing around with getting back and forth to at least two airports on any trip under, say, four hundred miles.

The economic and political system of the Commonwealth is directly based on the nineteenth century British Empire without royalty, on the cusp of becoming the so-called British Commonwealth of Nations without a monarch, and a multi-planetary corporate capitalism running slightly and realistically amok. The relationship between corporate power and political democracy is rendered as complex, ambiguous, and moderately corrupt as one would expect such a set-up to be and as the British Empire certainly was.

Kime himself and the two guys who invented the wormhole generator are still around and transformed into major economic and geopolitical players. The star that has disappeared, it turns out, has not really vanished, but some sort of mysterious shield has instantaneously appeared around it. The central plot-line involves the building of a spaceship capable of getting there without a wormhole gateway at the other end, commanded by Kime; what they encounter; and the interstellar war that then ensues.

Hamilton does a great job of getting you from your present to his beautifully and convincingly detailed future and into the mystery-generated narrative tension very

quickly, which was why I at least was hooked. Two chapters in, there's a subplot involving terrorists convinced a shadowy invisible alien is manipulating the Commonwealth government, a super detective who's been on their trail for centuries, and quite a bit more, with interesting characters you care about.

However. . .

However, Hamilton violates the hoary science fictional maxim that you don't have to explain the workings of the internal combustion engine and the technical details of highway construction just because your character is driving from New York to Chicago.

Hamilton does this with his interstellar trains. He does it with the rejuvenation technology. With the building of the starship. With the e-butlers. With just about every bit of imaginary technology he introduces.

Up to a point, this is a strength, because he does it very well indeed. He also does it with the geography, ecology, economic base, architecture, and city planning or lack of it of every planet depicted in the book, and he does this equally well.

But maybe halfway in it started to become overdone, wearying, slowing the story to a crawl, and all the more so, because while the main story is going on, a very long subplot is interwoven with the main story, which ends up consisting of little more than an odyssey from interesting planet to interesting planet primarily for the purpose of admittedly interesting description and exposition for its own sake.

Hamilton does this world building as well as anyone ever has or could. He's very, very good at it. Maybe too good for his own good. Maybe he knows how good he is at this all too well and has fallen a little too much

in love with his own world-building talent.

One thing that *Pandora's Star* desperately needed and apparently didn't get was an editor sitting down with the author and line-editing the manuscript. It would have been a tedious but simple enough task to boil two hundred or even three hundred pages out of these 988 pages, to the novel's literary benefit.

And who knows—if *Judas Unchained* suffers from the same degree of bloat, the two volumes could have gotten rid of five hundred or even six hundred unnecessary and literarily counterproductive pages by tough line editing and have been published, and more importantly structured, as one admittedly huge twelve hundred page novel.

It has been done, you know. *War and Peace*. *Finnegans Wake*. Okay, price-wise it may not be feasible any more by conventional means. But there is a way around it that has been used and that could be adopted—what my French publisher did with the mass market edition of *Russian Spring* and with other long novels as well. They broke it into two volumes without hiding that this was one continuous novel and published them *simultaneously*. You could buy volume one and read it before you decided whether you wanted to go on, and if you did, you could buy the second volume immediately, or you could buy both at one time, or, in the case of *Russian Spring*, the two volumes in a fancy boxed set.

These were paperbacks, but there's no reason it couldn't be done likewise with hardcovers at great and obvious advantage to the potential readers, but at even greater but less obvious advantage to the writer.

Peter Hamilton's *Pandora's Star*, and *Judas Unchained*, demonstrate

the reason why. *Pandora's Star* suffers from the bloat described above. I've opined that *Judas Unchained* might suffer from the same to the same degree, but when I finally finished reading *Pandora's Star*, I was very loath to try to find out, for I realized that the bloat slowing down the story in *Judas Unchained* might be even worse.

Because it would almost *have* to be worse.

The last part of *Pandora's Star* concerns an interstellar war between the Commonwealth and the aliens of the solar system in question, the terrorists-against-the hidden-alien-manipulator plot, and the multi-planet odyssey. But the book ends with *none* of these stories resolved, and with—I swear I am not making this up—a literal cliff-hanger, after 988 pages.

The reason I read *Pandora's Star* first before considering *Judas Unchained* was because I thought *Judas Unchained* would be unreadable to anyone who hadn't. But what if I was wrong? What if Hamilton felt compelled, and not unreasonably, to do the sort of thing that Meaney did in the third volume of the Nulapeiron cycle and bring the reader who had not read *Pandora's Star* up to speed on 988 pages of back story?

Literarily speaking, damned if he did, and damned if he didn't, and currently I'm most reluctant to read *Judas Unchained* to find out. Because if he did, *Judas Unchained* is likely to crawl like a snail for the reader who has read *Pandora's Star*, and if he didn't, the reader who hasn't will be utterly lost.

But, assuming there isn't going to be a third installment, if *Pandora's Star* and *Judas Unchained* had been conceived, and more importantly written, as one long novel, not only

would that inherently paradoxical problem have vanished, but another hundred or two hundred pages of back story stuff in *Judas Unchained* would never even have had to be written in draft. And with the line editing mentioned above, that one big Kahuna could be brought down to a thousand pages—again to its literary benefit, *not* at all for the sake of commercial compromise.

Each of the existing two separate novels are almost that long already, and yet somehow commercially viable—or so at least the publisher hopes—at that length. And even if the single thousand page version were not, the French solution not only solves the problem nicely, but ends up selling more copies overall.

Necessity is the mother of invention.

Those who adapt survive.

And in the case of Hamilton's grand opus, a little evolutionary marketing thinking on the part of the publisher, probably in Britain where this work was originally published, and some tough editorial evolutionary pressure in setting a thousand page limit for the final version, would probably have turned unfortunate commercial constraint into literary virtue.

River of Gods by Ian McDonald is nowhere near as long as either of the Hamilton books, though it is a long novel by today's commercial parameters, 597 pages. But Pyr, which somehow manages to keep doing this, has kept the hardcover price down to the magic twenty-five dollars.

It, too, was first published in Britain, in 2004, where it won the British Science Fiction Association Award for Best Novel, was nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and even the Worldcon's Hugo—as well it should have been.

I don't place that much credence

in such awards or nominations, but *River of Gods* is a masterpiece, I can't think of a better science fiction novel I've read in years. It should have won all of the above, as well as whatever other such bowling trophies were available.

Certainly it should have been eagerly and immediately gobbled up by any American publisher favored with a look at the manuscript or the British galleys. But it wasn't. The so-called major American SF lines passed, and there was no US edition at all for two years until Pyr once more rescued a worthy British novel from Yankee oblivion.

Why?

I've written and complained and even tried to explain this sort of thing before, but when it comes to *River of Gods* I find it totally outrageous. This novel is a masterpiece of science fiction by any meaningful standard and even some that are not. No slur on Hamilton at all, but *River of Gods* is superior to *Pandora's Star* or presumably *Judas Unchained*—the point being that it is therefore proven not to be commercially unviable because of length. Moreover, McDonald had already published several excellent science fiction novels in the United States, if perhaps nothing quite on this level. So commercial pricing and unit cost constraints don't seem to be the reason why this novel had trouble finding an American publisher.

Why?

Literarily it certainly makes no sense, and given the in-group award and nominations it makes no sense either in terms of hitting the so-called "fan base." If Del Rey could bring out *Judas Unchained* as an American hardcover, why wouldn't a major established American publisher be eager to publish *River of Gods*,

a literarily superior novel, a good deal shorter, a Hugo nominee off the British edition, and therefore with a potentially wider readership?

In the end, the only answer I can think of is political. British science fiction writers have been complaining of the difficulty of getting their work published in the United States for some time now, but that's not what I mean by political; it can't be, since both McDonald and Hamilton are in the same UK boat there.

But *River of Gods* is the great SF novel about India. It isn't just set in a near future India, it is *about* a future India; deeply, completely, and on a multiplicity of levels, from high government and scientific circles, to show biz, to religious and mystical complexities, to the lowest sleazoid levels of the Indian underworld.

Moreover, this is an extrapolated future in which what we now know as "India" has fractured into several independent states, two of which, thanks to the failure of the monsoon due to global warming, end up in a "water war."

River of Gods is also a science fiction novel that delves deeply and cogently into the question of the evolution of Artificial Intelligences, moving toward Vernor Vinge's "Singularity," the asymptotic moment when their self-evolving advancement takes them so far beyond humanity that we can no longer even comprehend what they are and they become the gods of our puny reality and we become pets or go extinct.

McDonald not only demolishes this notion, but does so by turning it around emotionally and theologically, and does so from a Hindu perspective.

I will not attempt a plot summary of this wonderfully complex novel told from the viewpoints of several

well-realized characters, except to say that all the plot threads—hard science, the Indian soap opera genre, the rise and fall and rise of two petty gangsters, the discovery of an artifact from the future at a La Grange point, Artificial Intelligence, Indian politics, Hinduism, future Indian police procedural—interweave in the manner of a Bach fugue, or indeed in the manner of the polytheistic complexities of Hinduism itself, entirely successfully in structural and thematic terms. And yes, it all does come together in a most satisfying apotheosis at the end.

When my novel *Russian Spring* was published in the then Soviet Union I went to Moscow for the launch, and several people there paid me the great compliment of telling me they couldn't believe it wasn't written by a Russian.

The Times of India is quoted on the cover of the Pyr hardcover of *River of Gods* saying "Not bad for a Firang (non-Indian) who has oodles of imagination and chutzpah."

Not bad? When an Indian writer produces a novel with such a level of immersion in the extrapolated complexities of the future of his own culture, I will eat lamb shaag topped with chocolate ice cream.

McDonald takes the reader to a level of immersion in the fine detail, texture, consciousness, pop culture, very being, of an extrapolated non-western culture that is utterly awesome—and, for a novelist occasionally attempting to do something like the same sort of thing, daunting. The novel reads as if Ian McDonald spent a year or more wandering around India ripped on ganja and LSD with an American Express card and a mobile high speed internet connection.

It's difficult to avoid believing that this very literary and cultural virtue is the source of the political reason

that the major American SF lines let a novel of this caliber go unpublished in the United States for two years until Pyr rescued it. I have the awful feeling that the nationality of the writer had nothing to do with it, but rather it was the collective editorial judgment of the corporate publishing powers that be in the United States that an American readership would not be interested in such total immersion—not only in the reality of the future of a Third World entity like India, but in a future Indian culture no less advanced and complex than any near future imagined for their own.

If I am right about this, and *they* were right about the degree of parochialism of the American readership, of the supposedly visionary science fiction reader at that, then it's a lot more than the literary culture of the United States that's now in deep dark doody.

The usual fulsome praise of one novelist to another in such circumstances is "I wish I had written that." No way. Speaking as a novelist who has set fiction in an extrapolated Soviet Union, Gaul at war with Rome and Julius Caesar, Mexico at the time of Cortes' conquest, presently the Hadj and a civil war in Nigeria, it's not just "I wish I had written that," but "how in hell did McDonald do it?"

But one thing I can say with confidence is that a work of fiction like *River of Gods*, even if it were twice as long—and as I approached the

end of it I found myself sorry that it wasn't—could never ever have been written as a trilogy or a duology or anything but a single novel, and for two reasons in a feedback relationship with each other.

It is the novelistic structure that not only holds such a long and even somewhat discursive novel like *River of Gods* together and allows it all to be brought together in a final epiphany—a structure that simply cannot be applied to a novel "cycle" or "sequence," but allows such a literary work to read "faster" or "shorter" than the middle or concluding novel of even the best trilogy because there is no clogging of the flow by the introduction of necessary back story.

A trilogy or novel sequence simply cannot be structured like one big free-standing novel. By its very nature, such a novel sequence can only be a compromise between practical commercial and informative necessity and novelistic literary structure. Sometimes it can work rather well on its own terms, as with Meaney's Nulapeiron Sequence, but compromise it must be or fail even on those terms.

And what a long well-structured novel like *River of Gods*, free-standing unto itself and literarily uncompromised by current market restraints on length can be, is what will be lost if works of such magnitude should become commercially unpublishable. ○

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

With WorldCon over things quiet down. Here's a look ahead to next year's cons. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

SEPTEMBER 2006

22-24—Foolsap. For info, write: c/o Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect).

(Web) foolscapcon.org. (E-mail) chair@foolscapcon.org. Con will be held in: Bellevue WA (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Sheraton. Guests will include: none announced. For SF and fantasy on paper: writing and art.

22-24—FenCon, Box 560576, The Colony TX 75056. fencon.org. Dallas TX area. A.D. Foster, Butcher, L. Watt-Evans.

22-24—RimCon Victoria, Box 32108, Victoria BC V8P 4H0. Michael Sheard (Admiral Ozzle, Robin of Sherwood).

28-Oct. 1—BoucherCon, c/o Box 55023, Madison WI 53705. bouchercon.com. Robt. B. Parker. World mystery con.

OCTOBER 2006

5-8—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org. Collinsville IL (near St. Louis MO). E. Moon, Vic Milán.

6-8—AlbaCon, Box 2085, Albany NY 12220. albacon.org. Crowne Plaza. Peter David, Omar Rayyan.

6-8—ConClave, Box 2915, Ann Arbor MI 48106. conclavest.org. Crowne Plaza Detroit Airport, Romulus MI. C. Asaro.

6-8—Another Anime Con, Box 692, Nashua NH 03064. anotheranimecon.com. Radisson, Manchester NH. Howard Taylor.

13-15—AngliCon, Box 75536, Seattle WA 98175. (206) 789-2748. Greater Seattle area. British media.

20-22—CapClave, 7113 Waybe Dr., Annandale VA 22003. capclave.org. Hilton, Silver Spring MD (near DC).

27-29—NecronomiCon, Box 2213, Plant City FL 33564. stonehill.org/necro.html. Tampa FL. Lots of hall costumes.

NOVEMBER 2006

3-5—World Fantasy Con, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. worldfantasy.org. Renaissance. Cook, Duncan, Denton, Lord.

10-12—WindyCon, Box 184, Palatine IL 60078. windycon.org. Wyndham, Rosemont (Chicago) IL. McDevitt, T. Smith.

10-12—AstronomiCon, Box 31701, Rochester NY 14603. (585) 342-4697. astronomicon.info. Clarion. Guests TBA.

10-12—United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8736. Marriott, Springfield MA. Media SF.

10-12—EclectiCon, Box 3165, Bayonne NJ 07002. eclecticon@rcn.com. Ramada, Newark NJ. Media fanzines. 18+ only.

17-19—PhilCon, Box 8303, Philadelphia PA 19101. philcon.org. Wyndham Franklin Plaza. 70th anniversary PhilCon.

24-26—Darkover, Box 7203, Silver Spring MD 20907. darkovercon.com. Holiday Inn Timonium, Baltimore MD. Kurtz.

24-26—BeNeLuxCon, Steenstraat 16, Puth 6155 KH, Netherlands. ncsf.nl. Grand Hotel de L'Empereur, Maastricht.

24-26—COsine, Box 50618, Colorado Springs CO 80949. firstfridayfandom.org. Colorado Springs CO.

JANUARY 2007

19-21—Arisia, Bldg. 600, #322, 1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge MA 02139. arisia.org. Park Plaza, Boston MA. SF/fantasy.

19-21—ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107. stilyagi.org. Marriott, Troy MI.

26-28—VeriCon, H-R SF Assn., 4 University Hall, Cambridge MA 02138. vericon.org. Harvard University.

FEBRUARY 2007

16-18—Boskone, Box 807, Framingham MA 01701. boskone.org. Westin Copley Plaza, Boston MA. Hub's oldest con.

AUGUST 2007

2-5—Archon, Box 8387, St. Louis MO 63132. archonstl.org. Collinsville IL. 2007 No. American SF Convention. \$60+.

30-Sep. 3—Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org. Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. \$180+.

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Our lead story for December is by multiple Hugo-, Nebula-, and World Fantasy Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** returns us to the bizarre milieu of "King Dragon," "The Word That Sings the Scythe," and "An Episode of Stardust," half Faerie and half gritty science fiction, where haints and feys and elves mix with subways and motorcycles and mechanical dragons, for a dangerous journey deep into the unknown maze of tunnels beneath Babel Tower, as one dragon-haunted man dares to enter "Lord Weary's Empire" The question is, can he get *out* again? This is as vivid, exciting, and evocative a novella as you're going to read this year, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN DECEMBER

Popular new writer **Paolo Bacigalupi** plunges us into a harrowing but all-too-probable future Bangkok, as we share the nightmarish life endured by the "Yellow Card Man"; Hugo- and Nebula-winner **Brian W. Aldiss**, one of the giants of the field, takes us on a voyage that is anything but "Safe!," either for the voyager or for the folks back home; new writer **Ian Creasey** shows us a future where the past is *not* prologue, but rather may be as good as it's going to *get*, as he examines "The Golden Record"; acclaimed British writer **Christopher Priest**, making a long-overdue *Asimov's* debut, takes us on "A Dying Fall" into what happens between your penultimate moment and your last; **Robert Reed**, one of our most popular and prolific contributors, paints an eccentric portrait of a peculiar society that for all its oddness is not only attractive but strangely "Plausible"; and new writer **Susan Forest**, making her *Asimov's* debut, demonstrates that when a deadly plague breaks out on a frontier planet, "Immunity" can cost more than you're really willing to pay for it.

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column speaks of things "Flashing Before My Eyes"; and **Peter Heck** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our December issue on sale at your newsstand on October 10, 2006. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, www.asimovs.com).

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